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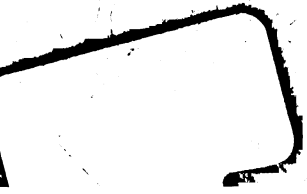

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The White Lady
of Khaminavatka.

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The White Lady of Khaminavatka

A Story of the Ukraine

By

Richard Henry Savage.

Author of "The Masked Venus," "Checked Through," "The Lost Countess Falka," "A Modern Corsair," "For Her Life," "In the Shadow of the Pyramids," "In the Swim."

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CONTENTS.

BOOK I.

A KHERSON VENDETTA.

CHAPTER.		PAGES.
I	A Contested Election. The Barren Victory,	5–22
II	A Palace of the Steppes,	22–46
III	Easter Eve at Bratskoe,	46–75
IV	On Hostile Ground,	75–94
V	Stolen Kisses,	95–112

BOOK II.

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE.

VI	Xenia's Plan,	113–131
VII	The Red Danger Light,	131–156
VIII	Princess Vera's Visit. Down the River,	157–185
IX	The Foot of the Foeman. Betrayed!	185–214
X	Xenia's Stratagem. With the Dead!	214–239

BOOK III.

PAYING THE PRICE.

XI	The White Lady of Khaminavatka,	241–263
XII	A Weaving Spider,	263–286
XIII	A Watchful Quartette. Arcady's Recrudescence,	287–309
XIV	At the New Post Station. A Woman Scorned,	309–336
XV	The Midnight Surprise. Love's Miracle. Back from the dead,	336–370

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THE WHITE LADY OF KHAMINAVATKA.

A STORY OF THE UKRAINE.

BOOK I.—A KHERSON VENDETTA.

CHAPTER I.

A CONTESTED ELECTION.—THE BARREN VICTORY.

"Barin! They have taken the road before us. What are we to do?" cried Ivan, the coachman, as he reined up his smoking steeds at the crossroads.

The sleeper awoke with a start, and lazily contemplated the womanish form of Ivan, in his long blue robe, decorated with silver bell buttons,—the quaint low silk coachman's hat,—his flowing golden beard alone saving his visible claims to sex.

Here, on the sloping knoll, the roads from Bratskoe and Khaminavatka joined, and the rival noble houses used the same track over the steppes, to the cheerless town of Novokrainka, nestling in a stony low valley, by the cheerless banks of the muddy Bug.

"Drive on slowly. Let one of the men gallop down into the valley. If he finds them already there, let him come back and warn you, and, we will then,—go on to the Post Station." With an air of affected unconcern, the master sank back upon his pillows, and the tchetviorka moved slowly on.

One of four well mounted Cossack outriders had dashed down into the glen, and Ivan cast his eyes anxiously backward over the brown steppe to note the position of the three khibitkas following smartly on, with the master's luggage.

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The four splendid black Orloffs proudly bore that silver star in their foreheads which marks the haughtiest lineage of the blue blooded trotters of the Don.

They were matchless, in Kherson,—in all of New Russia,—even in the broad Ukraine,—and, would have found no peers on that vast steppe which sweeps along from China to the Danube.

The heavy caleche was of luxurious appointments. The richness of the silver mounted harness,—the splendid covers and weather hood,—all indicated the grand seigneur on his travels.

There were two light trunks strapped behind, a larder and mess chest under the driver's box, and,—within the caleche,—His Excellency Pierre Alexis Dumont, the manor lord of Khaminavatka, was stretched out, reposing comfortably upon well wadded cushions and pillows of down.

Lanterns for night driving, a couple of pistol holsters and a superb English double rifle evidenced the thoughtful traveler.

The peasants, but two years liberated from serfdom, were all well armed, for, in these ante-railroad days of sixty-five, there were yet wild men prowling upon the lonely wastes across which for a thousand years the mounted Asian barbarians swept into the open doors of Europe.

"A cool one, the master," mused Ivan, as he slowly guided his four steeds, harnessed abreast, down a steep cut road, winding through a little rocky glen, into a meadow where a dozen houses were clustered.

It was a sink in the rolling, seemingly sterile, prairie, treeless and all forlorn, which stretched from Elizabethgrad to Kharkof, and, from Woloczisk to Odessa. The home of the conquering Tartar, the Cossack's stronghold, the theater of forgotten wars.

Ivan's back stiffened with pride, as the Cossack outrider came briskly trotting back, throwing up his hand in a warning signal. A half dozen traveling carriages were now grouped in front of a clump of willows in the hollow, where a priceless spring gushed forth and pretty Marika, the belle of the farm steading, was loud in her

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coquettish laughter as the single carriage drove slowly by at half pistol shot range.

There were a dozen men,—the hated clan of the Radovichs,—clustered around the all too willing fair one, as Pierre Dumont raised himself on his elbow and harshly cried, "Drive on quickly—to the Post Station."

With a frightened glance, Ivan, essentially a man of peace, then saw his master loosen his holster revolvers, and grasp the famous double rifle which had slain so many Ukraine wolves and Volhynian elk.

Bears from Tambov, and—other and nobler game had fallen before the muzzle of that dreaded gun.

But, as the four Orloffs crowned the hill, Pierre Dumont laughed bitterly and dropped his rifle.

"The cowards would never dare to face me," he sneered. "I shall beat them yet,—for all their family rally."

And—so, it fell out, that while the hostile Radovichs sullenly stared, open eyed, Pierre Dumont calmly drew out his cigarette case, a marvel of Outchinikoff's handiwork, clustered with monograms and jewel studded.

The Lord of Khaminavatka was hidden in blue smoke wreaths as his carriage drew up before the cheerless post station on the farther hill.

His eager retainers were all clustered around as the station keeper's whole family rushed to the front of the squalid whitewashed mud hut in acknowledgment of the unexpected honor.

"Feed your horses, get me a samovar, eat your own suppers and we will then drive on," curtly ordered the master, as Tourko, his valet, nimbly hopped from his perch at Ivan's side.

The carriage had been artfully swung around to fend off the evening winds of the steppe, and the nimble valet flew to prepare his master's supper, opening a mess chest whose silver service bore the crest of the proud Dumonts

Dogs, pigs, ducks and geese clattered in a huddle about the squalid stone station house, whose sheepfold, barnyard and stable were marked with outlying mountains of animal refuse.

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The black and white post, the official double-headed eagle, and a pretentious inscription, marked the Post Station, in whose doors a couple of Jew peddlers timidly eyed the lord of two hundred thousand acres. Their flowing gaberdines and corkscrew curls bespoke them as under the ban. Specters, homeless and houseless,—not within the pale of the law.

The station keeper, cap in hand, his red shirt flaming out over his dark trousers and high boots, murmured his obeisance while the four Cossacks drove off a half dozen huge wolf-fanged Cossack watch dogs, their grizzled manes rising truculently over their massive shoulders. To his profound salaams, Baron Pierre returned only a curt nod of sufferance.

Xenia, his wife, quickly throwing a gossamer shawl around her bared bosom, now humbly approached, with a plate bearing bread and salt! The spell of a remarkable beauty lingered on her wistful face, and a fierce flame of vigorous life still shone in her burning black eyes!

She had not forgotten a May night but a few years ago when the Lord of the Manor had led her out, under the white Kherson moon, into the lindens, after a village peasants' ball. For then she was renowned far and near as the peasant queen of the Kherson. Beautiful still,—though wretched!

Pierre Dumont dismissed them both with measured coolness. He had forgotten all but the presence of his hated enemies clustering below him there, in the sheltered glen.

With cold, steely eyes, the burly man of fifty gazed out over the lonely steppe, now glowing like burnished copper in the last rays of an autumn sun.

The sheep and cattle were slowly wandering homeward, and the far away shouts of the herdsmen sounded shrill in the silence of the coming night.

Far away rolled the horizon of the treeless waste, now shorn of its harvests. In the east, a pale, sickly moon was vainly struggling to blend its rays with the radiance of the dying sun.

With sepulchral significance, the Tartar Kourganes

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dotted the unbroken plains, those bald, round mounds telling of all the fierce life which had burned itself out, in past ages—here in this lonely land!

A land of silence, and of sorrows! A land of thrilling memories too! For, the spell of the past was stealing over Dumont as he brooded over his enemies near him—and—the coming struggle of the election for Marechale de Noblesse at Elizabethgrad.

While the valet deftly lit the carriage lanterns and spread a portable table in the caleche, Pierre Dumont wandered out alone on the shorn steppe.

There was little to indicate the richness of the fifteen-foot black loam of the granary of Europe. The brown breast of the waste was stretched to receive the autumn rains, and open to the winter snows. Clad in a dark surtout of the finest black broadcloth wadded with cotton, with gloves and turban of priceless sea otter, the manor lord faced the chill breeze. The Russian noble was indeed a stately presence.

His athletic figure,—his sun-browned visage,—his gleaming dark eyes and close curling black hair and beard, proved a man of marked resolution and energy.

But, standing alone this night, a human dot on the great steppe, his heart failed him. The utter loneliness of the scene palsied his iron heart.

Born in the superb family castle on the Ukraine steppe,—educated at the University of Moscow and later at Heidelberg,—he had gone out into the great world, but, his heart had throbbed ever for the wild, lonely land of his birth! And, a golden-hearted woman had once made this loneliness a Paradise to him for long years.

On this cheerless night, he heard again her last whisper, "Pierre, I love you!" But,—life and love said Good Bye as that dear voice was stilled forever.

The Lady of Khaminavatka now slept the sleep which knows no waking in the splendid family chapel, nestling under the walls of the stately chateau builded by his grandfather,—and, the childless widower had at last turned to social ambition as an occupation of his later years. Lord of a dozen manors in Podolia,—Bessarabia,—Volhynia, and Tambov, he clung fondly to the palace

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on the steppes where the beloved woman who had lain upon his heart lay buried near him, her folded arms crossed on her gentle breast.

In the days of the new dispensation,—the freeing of the serfs,—Pierre Dumont had remained to minister to the two villages of eight hundred and twelve hundred souls, on his paternal estates.

They were struggling along in the transition period from serf to freeman, and the hasty bounty of the Czar, the gift of an unexplained freedom, was as yet merely an untried experiment, the Mir system slowly developing into life.

A Marquis by birth, of an historic French family,—an Excellence,—a noble bearing the highest orders of the Russian crown,—he had given up his lonely life to tree plantation,—to improving his estates,—to lifting up the sad, stolid Little Russians and the New Russians around him,—and he watched from afar the brilliant career of his only brother, Major Serge Armand Dumont, a glittering courtier, now Major of the Chevalier Garde Regiment, the unforgotten heroes of Austerlitz.

The night winds sighed around him, as one bright star, the planet of Love, swung up over the darkening steppe.

"I can do good here,—to my poor people,—as Marechale de Noblesse," he sighed,—"and,—I will always be near her!

"It was her life work—to raise up the hapless Kherson peasantry!" His face hardened as, with a wild flourish of whips, a dozen carriages swept by. It was the cavalcade of his rivals, the Radovichs. They were hastening on to defeat the only ambition of his darkened life.

"Canaille!" he muttered. "I shall conquer you,—for all your gathered clansmen." He slowly retraced his steps, for the little train of his own retainers had toiled up out of the glen, and Tourko, at his side, now summoned the lonely man to his repast arranged in the curtained caleche.

Half an hour later, the four black Orloffs were stretching away over the steppe with their tireless stride, and

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the little Post Station relapsed into its lethargic monotony.

When Pierre Dumont dropped his head on his cushions, his last order was for the four armed Cossacks to keep a hundred yards in advance of the tchetviorka, as a living buffer between himself and his foemen. For, treason and thirst of blood haunted his steppe path now.

On, under the starlight, the caleche moved, threading the beaten track over the forty cheerless versts of lonely waste stretching to Novokrainka.

Tourko and Ivan, on the box, both armed to the teeth, in bated whispers, talked in whispers under the lonely stars of the hereditary feud of the Dumonts and the Radovichs.

Before them, in the road, the four watchful Cossacks rode, ready for an attack—their forms a dark blue in the thin blue night air.

Both the gossiping retainers knew that the assembled nobles of Kherson would soon choose either a Radovich or a Dumont to be the four years leader of the aristocrats! For two weeks, the beautiful city of Elizabethgrad had been convulsed with the cabals of the assembling boyars.

"They outnumber us," sadly said Tourko, with a sinking heart. "The Barin will succeed," proudly answered Ivan. "He never fails." And—then, the old grizzled coachman, lighting his cigarette, recounted the numberless victories of the Dumonts over the hated Radovichs. For, fortune and honor clung to the line of the Dumonts.

The simple servitor's chronicles only went back to the time when Catherine the Second had rounded out the work of Elizabeth and Peter the Great! In a land without literature,—a land where the Cossack horse spurned with his hoofs the dust of the forgotten brave,—the scheming Potemkin and bold Orloff, lovers both of the Imperial Sphinx,—had rolled back the Turk forever.

In 1761,—New Russia was born, and the Cossack horde, moulded of fierce Tartar,—brave Magyar,—wild Slav,—brutal Turk,—cunning Asiatic, and stolid incom-

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ing Russian, had replaced the Mongol hosts now fading away into the twilight of history.

Ivan knew by family tradition of how the Bulgarian, Serbian, and Russian border nobles had crowded over into the steppe land,—how the open hand of Catherine, at the dictate of her amorous heart, had showered crown gifts of domains upon French refugee, German Ritter, and all proper men who caught that softened, roving, Imperial eye.

The two henchmen were, like all the two thousand souls at Khaminavatka, heirs of the border vendetta which had followed the coming of the Dumonts and the Radovichs to opposite sides of the Mertvovod, the Dying Water. The north and south banks had been at war for a hundred years.

The old General and Marquis Dumont had located the north bank of the priceless stream, and left his vast possessions to his two sturdy sons, fortunately married to Russian aristocrates, long before the two Radovich brothers had appropriated the southern side, and builded their two family strongholds at Bratskoe, and, at the bend of the Mertvovod,—the last but a mile and a half from the watch tower of that superb chateau of Khaminavatka, which was the pride of all the Kherson.

The third generation had found these powerful rivals still more deeply embittered and, only the stain of blood was now needed to raise the sedgy boundary in flame and fire—a guerre à l'outrance.

"If Barin Serge were the master,—there would have been blood enough shed before now," hazarded Tourko.

"Yes," sadly replied Ivan, crossing himself. "Only that dead angel Barina Elise,—and the master's lifelong sorrows, have prevented many murders. Besides,—since the Czar has taken away his souls—he has no one left to fight for him!"

And—then, Tourko, fingering his revolver and Circassian dagger, cried "Wait and see."

The long night wore away, only the howls of the summer-starved wolves broke the silence, and, in peace, at the flushings of dawn, the caleche crossed the rickety wooden bridge over the channeled Bug at Novokrainka.

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The home of the trading vultures who fatten on the Russian peasant.

On cheerless, stony plains, a few hundred thatched mud huts were clustered among some rugged knolls at a bend of the treacherous muddy flood.

In all the squalid city of three thousand souls, were only domiciled a hundred Russian soldiery and officials,—the whole population being the orthodox Polish cult of Jews who trafficked in usury and, with glib cunning, fattened upon the toil of the flaxen-haired, thick-headed Russian peasantry of a hundred and fifty square miles.

Cringing, cajoling, and insinuating, with their own secret mails,—places of safe refuge and banking arrangements, herding in their synagogues and bath houses,—this pliant, docile, cowardly mass, without labor easily controlled the destinies of the Russian peasant woman's little annual marketings by usurious craft and ate up the profits of the million rouble grain crop of the haughtiest noble.

In the smaller Kherson towns, a single police officer and a squad of a dozen soldiers alone represented the Czar, and, with wise acumen,—these sly Hebrews avoided Elizabethgrad,—Kharkov, and the greater Ukraine cities, where the sheen of the bayonets of the marching regiments was as stars on the sea.

Masters and tyrants of commerce,—these ruling slaves dominated a city where the hundred and four Russian holidays of the year were increased by the Jewish Sabbaths and feasts, and a fanatic religious rivalry killed all pulsing prosperity. A death in life—the parasite fattening—the country decaying.

As Ivan proudly drew up the caleche before the one Russian inn, at this City of the Dead, Excellence Pierre Dumont sprang nimbly from his ambulatory couch.

In ten minutes, over the samovar, the noble had learned all from Peter Petrovitch, the obsequious landlord.

There were no longer fears of any untoward collision, for the high road to Elizabethgrad, a hundred and fifty versts, was thronged with travel. And—the Radovichs feared the Czar's strong hand!

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The prettiest of Kherson maids, in richly embroidered white jacket, with trimmings of red and blue, beaded necklace, and collar with Greek cross, blue and red head dress, with yellow apron and crimson sash, hastened to serve a breakfast as lavish as good will could make.

In the courtyard, the Cossacks and servants soon groomed the hardy horses, and—at nine o'clock, the train of baggage wagons joined the traveling nobles' retainers.

Pierre Dumont's jeweled fingers had long been busy with a sheaf of letters and telegrams, when he drew forth his cigarette case and interrogated the landlord, the son of an old family intendant.

"Who went up?" demanded Pierre.

"All their force, Barin," answered the innkeeper. "General André Radovich;—his cousins from Tiraspol and Wosnescenk;—the Barin Alexander,—the mad Arcady,—and, all their available relatives. My wife came back from Elizabethgrad only yesterday.

"The Princess Orbeleff and Barina Radovich are giving dinners and suppers daily there. The Princess has brought the young Barina Magda down too, from the Catherine Institute, and the young Barin—Ivan of the Guards—is to bring all his Petersburg friends to help them in the election."

"Indeed!" growled Pierre Dumont, "a mighty array,—surely. Bring me a dozen telegraph blanks, and see that all my people are ready to go on at noon. I shall push ahead as soon as I can." He was eager for the clash with his hated enemies.

Pierre Dumont's brow was black when he had finished his nervously scrawled telegrams. For the long deferred wave of blood was rolling slowly on toward them, at last!

"I must trust to the Government's hidden influence,—to Barbe Federoff's matchless diplomacy—or,—else—all is lost. And—Serge must come down at once to Elizabethgrad."

The letter of the Major, his only brother and heir, told him of a mad rencontre at mess, after which Barbe Federoff's son had put a ball through the chest of Lieu-

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tenant Ivan Radovich of the Preobajenskys. A fatal rencontre!

The troubled noble sighed for his widowed sister, the mother of the young family fire eater, for the offending Wassili Federoff was already on his way to Siberia, to serve ten years as an officer of the Siberian Battalion.

Pierre Dumont's main social reliance had been his widowed sister Barbe Federoff—the leader of the Elizabethgrad noblesse, and the mother of the youthful duelist, a Lieutenant of the Chevalier Garde—under the eyes of his uncle Serge.

"La danse va commencer! It had to be"—sighed the anxious noble, who well knew the hot blood of the powerful Radovichs. "They will now try to revenge this happening upon Serge," he mournfully decided, as he drove away through the crowded streets where the chattering Hebrews were holding their morning money marts.

But, every one of his retainers had their orders as to sudden quarrel, and—the ten men, with the three khibitkas, were bidden to hasten on traveling by night and day into Elizabethgrad.

"No man's land!" sighed Pierre Dumont, as he dashed along to where the matchless Swedes were swallowed up by fiery Peter's hosts!

"Since the days of Pontus, and the old Greek dominion,—since the time of the Odyssey,—this open door of Europe has been held by Ostrogoth,—Bulgarian,—Petcheneges,—Magyars,—Poles, the hordes of Genghis Khan,—the fierce Turks, the roving Cossacks, and, now —mighty Russia.

"There's not a handful of dust which is not made up of the wind-blown ashes of warriors, and the Roman and Scythian struggled here to fill the insatiate maw of the tomb!"

The shadow of olden days of horror drifted down upon him and his mind was tenanted with all the fierce unrest which has from time immemorial haunted the dwellers in this lonely open battlefield of the ages. For the lonely steppe casts its shadows upon the human soul!

In the two days which followed as he sped along, un-

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ceasingly to his goal, he had already resolved upon his course. "I will protect Serge from their vengeance," he fondly thought. "He is young, the Benjamin of our scanty tribe, for—at twenty-eight—there is surely life and love before a man!" And, he revolved a thousand plans to circumvent his hated rivals now in the lead!

It was in a mood of great indecision that Pierre Dumont drove slowly through the embowered streets of Elizabethgrad to the mansion of his sister Barbe Federoff, the widow of the leading crown judge of Southern Russia.

The beautiful city of the plain was now thronged, and the sight of this luxury by the Ingul,—the rich streets,—the splendid suburbs,—the frowning bastions,—and the crowding military awoke his flagging ambition.

The fertile plains, with their studding windmills,—the splendid arsenal,—the crowds of richly clad merchants haunting the fair,—the legions of cavalry and all the bustle of a splendid city reminded him of the grave honors of Marechale of noblesse of a vast province.

With its local excitement of the election, crowds of Jews, peasants and shopkeepers aided the clamor of the curious burghers and the military, as the splendid chargers of Pierre Dumont paced solemnly up the main street of the quartier de noblesse.

The gleaming domes of the churches,—the luxury of the villas,—the splendor of boyar wealth, all made up an attractive scene, as the Lord of Khaminavatka drove within the courtyard of his widowed sister's splendid residence.

At the threshhold of the mansion, he was clasped in the arms of Major Serge Dumont, who had hastened from Petersburg to console the sad-eyed woman of sixty, now mourning over the blighted prospects of her hot-headed heir.

Serge Dumont was a knightly figure, in the splendid undress uniform of the Chevalier Garde.

In the rich prime of early manhood,—his athletic form, winning grace and impassioned, earnest face told of his legitimist ancestry, the very flower of the old regime of France. The fiery heart of his beautiful Russian mother

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beat in the young soldier's breast as he drew the head of his house away for a secret conference.

"Barbe!" cried Pierre.

"Is bowed down with Wassili's mad freak! Never mind!" hopefully cried Serge. "We will have him back next year! The Grand Duchesse has promised me his pardon! The duel was really unprovoked—and—I am anxious to avoid further trouble for you—Pierre.

"To leave you—alone—here—with these unforgiving Radovich miscreants is an agony! Be guided by me! The Czar is determined to stop duelling in the Guards Regiments!

"But the whole force of the Imperial Government will be thrown in your favor! You must remain here with Barbe! The election is to-morrow afternoon.

"Leave all to me! If there was a collision here—we would all be ruined! We must not be the aggressors!"

"The Princess Vera Orbeleff"—doubtfully said Pierre. "She is queening it here for the Baron Radovich—and,—the General is already at her side."

"Listen, Pierre!" laughed the Major. "There is a mystery in the power of the Princess Vera on the Neva. You remember that the Minister of War is my godfather."

Pierre nodded his head gloomily.

"Well! I have a letter of three lines from him for the Princess! General Radovich is to be made an Aide de Camp of the Czar! His brother will not be Marechale de Noblesse! For, the Minister is a bachelor and—must not be compromised! She has long sought this for André Radovich—as she is to spend her summer next year at Bratskoe—en visite—for—the fascinated old Minister will inspect Southern Russia."

"And,—the Imperial Aide de Camp!" cried Pierre.

"Will play sheep dog for his master! Leave all to me! Go to Barbe—console her! I shall muzzle this fiery little champion of Venus—and—she will do as I say!" smiled Serge. "Contre la force, il n ya pas de resistance."

It was late that night when handsome Serge Dumont returned from a magnificent ball which was given or

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neutral social ground,—by one of the greatest nobles of the Kherson.

In the intervals of the mazurka, the Princesse Vera Orbeleff found time to listen to a few words whispered by her enemy's brother which made the cheeks of the golden-haired angel paler than their wont!

The score of cavaliers of the Radovich faction never knew the magic which caused the daring little social free lance to whisper "à demain," as Serge Dumont escorted her to her seat among the flower of the opposing faction. But, there was a turn in the tide—and—Serge slept happily.

It was at the dinner table on the morrow, where Pierre Dumont faced his matronly, widowed sister, in an expectant silence, that Major Serge burst in, his face wreathed with the smiles of victory.

"It is over—Pierre," he cried. "Thirty-five votes to eighteen,—but—I beg you one favor in return. Beware of our enemies.

"The Radovichs left the Salle de Noblesse in a body—and—have gone home without even waiting for the Ball to-morrow night! They mean some mischief—and—I have a mind to apply for a three months' leave and, go home with you! I fear for your safety!"

"Nonsense," cried the new Marechale de Noblesse, "the Czar's servant is sacred—and—Khaminavatka is a fortress!" And—the brave Serge sighed and stifled his brooding fears in the joy of victory.

It was immediately after the splendors of the ball which crowned the unlooked for success of Excellence Pierre Dumont that the handsome Major Serge departed for Saint Petersburg, and—strangely enough, his carriage overtook that of the Princess Vera Orbeleff, who had been summoned by telegraph to the Neva, to be the first to apprise General André Radovich of the favor of a grateful Czar.

The blue eyes of the aristocratic intrigante were dreamy as she leaned back in her britzka, murmuring "I can wait,"—for—the sudden defeat of the Radovich clan had brought clouds upon her rosy present, but, with true Muscovite patience—"she bowed to superior au-

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thority." But, the little intrigante was dreaming of future favors of fickle fortune.

And, widowed Barbe Federoff—her dark hair silvered with past cares and present sorrows, clung to her favorite brother, as he said adieu a week later.

"Promise me—promise me, Pierre," she sobbed, "that you will only trust your own people! These Serbians will never forget their defeat—they will never forgive the duel in which my poor Wassili wounded their kinsman."

And, so—blind as mortals are, Pierre Dumont went his way to the lonely steppe, where he was the lord of two thousand souls and no shadow lingered upon his brow, as he thought of the future four years to be consecrated to the lifting up of the peasantry of the vast domain where the mad Peter,—the madder Charles, and the renegade Mazeppa, had fought with their horses fetlock deep in blood. The field where Sweden's sun set forever.

It was three weeks after the strangely decided election, where the invisible finger of a Czar had turned the scales of fortune, that the new Marechale de Noblesse was driving slowly homeward over the steppe toward the lonely palace whose lights were now shining out defiantly toward the hostile camp of the Baron Radovich, far across the bend of the sedgy Mertvovod.

The defeat of the hostile clan in the election of the nobles had been received with general rejoicing among the Kherson people.

The Serbian race of noble interlopers was still regarded as hostile by the Russianized Cossacks of the region, who looked upon the gentry of the Danube as aliens, whereas Pierre Dumont represented three generations of pure blooded Russian mothers and only one alien grandfather of French blood, a gallant strain and always welcome,—and—he was the idol of the Kherson villagers.

For, Russia in eight hundred years has assimilated the Varangian, the Dane,—Swede, and Norseman,—the German and Austrian,—the adventurous English and Scotch adventurers,—and—over the graves of the ruined race of the Nogay Tartars, and the children of the

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Khanates—the Cossack moulds the Tartar and Asiatic, and—the orthodox Russ follows on obliterating all—save the unhappy Jew and the hated Pole.

For, against the rocks of religious fanaticism, the burning tides of interest, greed, ambition, power, love or lust are beaten into vapory foam! Eternal decrees of Moloch hatred in the name of a varying cross! The Pole shall pass away—the Jew be ground into the mire of misery, such is the cold creed of the orthodox Muscovite.

Proud, brave and haughty, Pierre Dumont had ignored the affectionate warning of sister and brother! His mind never reverted to the ominous silence of the Radovichs, either the defeated candidate at the bend of the Mertvovod,—or the complacent widowed General of Bratskoe. Personal fear was no part of Pierre's composition, though he disdained all forms of military life. Grand seigneur he was born—lived and so—would die complacently.

The time of allotting the fields, and mapping out the plowing of twenty thousand acres had come, and—alone, the Marechale de Noblesse had followed his burly Intendant, Nicolas Boursakoff, over the darkened plains now enriched with a three days' soaking rain.

The stout superintendent led the way in a little pony cart, while the noble, traveling alone, guided a pair of his favorite Orloffs, in a light Americaine—a skeleton trotting buggy.

It was in the dusk of evening that the Lord of the Manor found himself at the farthest angle of his domains, and then,—dismissing his Intendant, who drove over the fields homeward, he turned his flying steeds toward the Post Station, where he had encountered his sullen rivals on the way to their Waterloo defeat at Elizabethgrad!

It was dark when he reined up before the little station, and called out for some one to receive a packet of belated letters.

Some unforgotten passion of her girlhood brought a tender glow to the handsome Xenia's face as she gasped,

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"My God! Barin! Alone—at night—out on the steppe! There are bad people!"

But, the noble only laughed as he handed her a five-rouble note in return for a glass of tea carefully decanted in her child's silver christening cup. And, with burning eyes, she followed him, her bosom heaving in a vain unrest.

As the clicking heels of the trotters echoed down the glen, the woman with flaming eyes ran back to her squalid hut and covered her head with her apron, in an agony of tears! She had heard vague rumors of a bloody vengeance upon the man whom she had once loved.

"I dared not tell him. If I had only dared," she murmured. For the village beauty had never forgotten that night stroll in the white moonlight—the one romance of her whole wretched life. But she knew that only beatings, perhaps murder would have repaid her for her daring interference.

She was on her knees before the icon, praying for his safety, as the splendid blacks dashed along the cut road by the rocky gorge far below her.

The Orloffs soon sniffed the water in the glen and sprang nervously along the homeward road, straining the spider-web harness with every bound of their sinewy limbs! It was chill and dark in the gloomy gorge.

At the darkest angle, the driver essayed to check their headlong gait, for the Marechale de Noblesse had been wandering back in the old time, and his horses had gained a terrific headway.

A sudden crash, as the steeds were hurled to their knees, by a heavy barrier of twisted ropes, then came the clatter of two maddened animals racing away for their stables, ten versts away.

There was a twisted mass of wreckage scattered in the road—a bruised and stiffening form lying on the rocks thirty feet below, and—a miscreant who stole down in the darkness, and muttering, "It is well," fled away, removing all the evidences of a cowardly murder!

It was daylight when the corpse was found by way-

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farers, and removed to Xenia's humble bed, with its piled up pillows.

There was no sign or whisper of foul play, and—a month later,—Major Serge Dumont resigned his commission in the Chevalier Garde—and,—a new Lord reigned at Khaminavatka!

CHAPTER II.

A PALACE OF THE STEPPES.

Major Serge Dumont was seated, alone, in his quarters, in the magnificent Caserne of the Chevalier Garde at St. Petersburg, a week after the untimely death which made him the head of his house, and the Lord of Khaminavatka, as well as a half dozen other manors.

The first flakes of winter snow were falling in the streets and the darkness of night added to the settled gloom of the mourning man.

He was gazing upon a pile of letters and telegrams, and the ticking of a French clock smote upon his weakened nerves.

"It is all over," he sighed, as his eye rested upon the trophied cuirass, eagle-crested helmet, gauntlets and crossed swords of his beloved Regiment, surmounting his mantel, where the picture of the dead Pierre seemed to call him away to the death in life of the steppe. He was at a crossing of Life's pathways.

He sprang to his feet as a timid knock sounded upon his door. As he threw it open, a veiled woman glided into the room.

"You!" he stammered, as, with a quick motion, the Princess Vera threw off her disguise, and showed him her lovely mutine face.

She sank into a chair and softly murmured, "You would see no one—I was forced to come to you. I stole away from a great dinner party—for I mean to try and keep you now!"

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The young noble gazed at her exquisite beauty,—her matchless form draped in the clinging silks,—her marble bosom bearing its superb necklace of Volga pearls. Their eyes met, and the bravest intrigante of Petersburg burst into tears, as she noted the young man's haggard face.

"Tell me all!" she simply said. "There is one thing that I can do for you—you must not be left alone in the world! I presume that you will give up your Regiment."

A sob broke from the soldier's heaving breast. "I must! There is poor Barbe,—alone,—no one near her now—and,—the dead man seems to call me away! We were all born there,—on the steppe,—at Khaminavatka! I must go—and take his place as head of the family."

In half an hour he had told her all. The court beauty could picture to herself widowed Barbe Federoff, alone, in the great halls of the palace of the steppes, standing by the coffin of the dead Marechale de Noblesse.

For, with no railroads to aid, it was a three weeks' journey by post chaise, to the family home, Wassili was already near the Urals on his way to his Siberian station, and Major Dumont's resignation and settlement of his accounts was a matter of slow detail. So the widowed sister had buried their dead alone.

"It all seems so incomprehensible, so maddening"—muttered Serge. "My sister has telegraphed that beyond the home people, and our own retainers, none will be asked to the funeral! The village pope at Bratskoe is our own domestic chaplain, and—with his acolytes and choir he will be the only one asked."

"None of the noblesse?" demanded Princess Vera—with a frightened look.

"Not one"—sadly answered Serge. "There can be no line drawn between friends and enemies, by my brother's open grave! I could not be there. He will be placed in the vaults in our chapel—where—I shall lie some day, please God, beside him."

There was a growing bond of sympathy between them as the Major recounted the meager story of the mysterious accident, and the maimed rites of the last obse-

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quies of the man who had gained a barren victory. He sank back into a chair and covered his face with his hands. It seemed a poor and pitiful ending to Pierre's career.

He lifted his haggard face, as the dainty woman laid her hand on his arm, and whispered softly, "You may ask yourself why I came to you—I knew Pierre in the old days—when I was a mere girl—and he a young cavalier, like yourself. And—he was kind to me,—kind —and—tender."

There were tears in her voice as she whispered, "I know your family pride—I now know all your sorrow. And,—I have tried to soften this blow. Listen. The Minister of the Interior has appointed the old Prince Youresief to be Marechal de Noblesse—to succeed your brother, on the telegraphed nomination through the Governor of Kherson by a majority of the nobles! There will be no new election!"

Serge Dumont breathed a sigh of sad relief! Thank God! none of his hereditary enemies would be in power for four long years! There was time to take up the battle later—and—perhaps—to rebuild the fortunes of his house.

There was a crimson flush flooding Vera Orbeleff's pale cheeks as she handed Major Dumont two papers. "These may be of some use to you in your helpless tangle now," she said, dropping her eyes.

The young noble gazed, in surprise, at an official order restoring Lieutenant Wassili Federoff to the Chevailer Garde Regiment. "The telegram for his return has been sent on to Ekaterinberg," murmured the beauty.

"So, you will have your nephew and heir back in the old regiment, and, next to the throne again. You must telegraph this to his mother! Young Ivan Radovich is rapidly recovering and he has applied, through his Colonel, for Federoff's pardon, admitting that he gave the first insult!"

"Does General André Radovich know of this?" hoarsely cried Serge Dumont, grasping her rounded arms in his shaking hands. It was the ignominy of

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death to accept favors at the hands of the recently promoted Aide de Camp to the Emperor.

In his heart, already lurked grim suspicions of a sullen vengeance following the defeat of the family enemies at Elizabethgrad. "I'll not accept it from him."

Vera Orbeleff glided to her knees by his side. "Take it—Serge!" she pleaded. "From me! Before God—I begged it from the Minister of War—myself!"

The young man raised the trembling woman and kissed her pallid cheeks, leaving their marble aflame with a sudden rose of shame.

"You darling woman!" he softly said. "You have saved a mother's heart from breaking."

He paced the floor in an unwonted agitation as he read the second paper. It was a plenary leave of absence for a month, with permission to him to turn his battalion over to the Senior Captain, with leave to resign, and then to settle his accounts within three months.

"Why did you do this, for me?" he faltered. "Because"—she cried, through her choking sobs, "I was the sport of the Clubs, at the Emperor's Coronation! My family jewels were in pawn, for forty thousand roubles, and bets were made that I could not appear at Moscow.

"Your brother was then a Court Chamberlain! He heard of it. One night—he brought to me all my jewels —and—Serge—I swear to you"—she gasped—sinking to her knees, "he never even touched my lips! For,—he was faithful to his dead wife!"

Serge Dumont only saw her through a mist of tears as she threw her shrouding disguise around her. "I must go—now—for your sake"—she murmured. "And—the Minister,—the General,—must never know."

The knightly noble kissed her trembling hands. "Loyal à la mort," he gravely said. "God be with you!"

She stood, a reluctant Peri at the door, and, then, a beautiful wraith glided to his side.

"For my sake—for the sake of the dead—promise me!" she pleaded. "You will not follow up this old feud—this border vendetta!" The strong man shuddered in an ecstasy of grief. But, the loving and beautiful woman would not be denied.

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She clung to him with a frenzied eagerness. "You are young—Serge. You will marry—some bright-hearted, lovely girl!

"There will be laughing child voices in the old Park—little feet wandering again in the leafy paths!"

And, the splendid woman, a leaf whirled along in the storms of Life, clung to him, until he framed his promise, "I will never lift a hand to strike the first blow! The past shall be buried in my brother's grave!"

But, he had drawn her to his side, "swear to me, Vera, that you know nothing of any foul play!" His soul was shaken with a suspicion that she was making amends for a hidden crime.

The trembling beauty gazed frankly upon him with her sorrow-haunted eyes. "By all the womanhood that's left to me—I swear that I know nothing—and—I would sooner die than lead you to your dishonor."

She clasped his hands and cried "For Pierre's sake!"—and—the loyal man whom a veiled murder had made the chief of old Marquis Henri Dumont's line, echoed from his shaken heart, "For Pierre's sake!"

"I shall see you next summer"—she whispered—"for, I go to Bratskoe,"—and—her lips framed that sweetest of Russian salutations, "Do swidanya!"

She was gone before Major Dumont lifted his weary head, and, lighter than the falling dews of night, her footfall echoed on the stair.

The lonely soldier followed her retreating footsteps with a throbbing heart.

"The Russian woman's bosom of snow hides a fiery and a loyal heart," he muttered. "The wild life of the Neva has not yet driven the primeval angel out of that stormy little breast. Gallant little gamester in the fierce play of Life—a reckless soul—but—yet—a woman—but, yet—a woman!"

With a smile, he picked up Vera Orbeleff's lace handkerchief lying at his feet, and thrust it in his bosom. "And so,—she loved Pierre—and,—was silent! Did ever man know aught of woman—the wavering feverish-hearted angel, hovering between earth, heaven and hell, the changeling who knows not herself!"

It was midnight before Major Dumont parted from

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his Senior Captain, and, at dawn, with a hurried adieu to the chosen half dozen comrades of his heart, the heir of the Dumonts sprang into his carriage for a fifteen hundred mile ride.

His body servants were all left behind to pack and send on the treasured "disjecta membra" of his quarters, and he was fifty miles away on the Moscow road, before Vera Orbeleff woke from the dreams of a palace ball to wonder at the huge basket of Parma violets speaking of the man who had given her the pledge of a life.

With trembling fingers she opened the note, and, when she gazed upon the matchless diamonds of the ring which fell flashing before her, she bowed her head in a prayer.

"God grant that he may never learn—what I do not know—but, what I fear he may some day learn!"

And—the sparkling diamonds were wet with tears as pure as ever woman shed, while Serge Dumont's letter rested upon the restless heart whose chords had been thrilled by every storm of Life. And, so the new Lord of Khaminavatka sought his steppe kingdom!

Far away, in the bleak Kherson land, now veiled in snow—a lonely woman thanked God and the Czar for the news which gave back to her the son whose career had been blighted by the sudden quarrel with Baron Radovich's heir.

The messenger had ridden sixty versts at a hard gallop from Novokrainka, through the cheerless night, and Barbe Federoff looked out of the chateau windows to the chapel where the stately Pierre slept among his fathers.

"I have buried our dead," she softly said. "I must go home now to Elizabethgrad, and greet Serge, who must find his house in order!"

In a half an hour, sturdy Nicolas Boursakoff, the Intendant,—the wrinkled old housekeeper Chuchinka,—Anna Ivanowna, her pretty niece,—the gardener and head forester,—as well as the stable chief, were all gathered to hear the Châtelaine's orders for the reception of the new lord of the manor.

Widowed Barbe Federoff, Excellence, and Doyenne

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of the noblesse of Elizabethgrad, went softly over the great chateau alone, in a fond adieu.

Her eyes were filled with tears, as she recognized every corner dear to her childish games,—every nook of the gardens and the park was visited, where her bright-eyed brothers had often laid in wait for their velvet-eyed baby sister!

Alas! One had laid his life down at Inkermann, and she had just seen the calm face of the next, sealed behind the marble slab of the vacant niche in the chapel.

But, at dawn, conducted by the watchful Boursakoff, Excellence Barbe Federoff drove out of the splendid courtyard, where five hundred loyal peasants stood uncovered to greet the Lady of Khaminavatka. It was a sad and stately parting.

With averted eyes, the old noblewoman shuddered as her swift steeds swept down through the glen where Pierre Dumont's body had been found.

Pious hands had already reared a huge cairn of stones with a Greek cross, but the bereaved woman never saw it. When the carriage paused at the Post Station, Xenia, the watchful, awaited her old mistress to kiss the hands which had showered benefits on her in her girlhood. And—the old patrician was the sister of the man whom she had madly adored, looking up from her misery.

With the frank manner of the Russian aristocrat, Excellence Federoff told her former serf of the expected arrival of Major Serge Dumont. Xenia paled and covered her eyes with her hands.

Tears trickled through her fingers as she sobbed, "Tell the Barin not to ride the steppe alone!

"There is Boursakoff,—there are twenty Cossacks,—and a dozen outriders always in the stables! Out there, yonder, parted our dear, dead Barin with Boursakoff on that fearful night! If he had only driven home with him —he would have been alive to-day!" And poor Xenia's eyes were filled with blinding tears.

When the Intendant was about to mount the carriage box, Xenia whispered to him, "Nicolas Nicolaivitch! I must see the young Barin—when he comes!"

The poor woman stood in the door of her squalid

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home, gazing after the splendid equipage as it whirled away.

"Dare I tell him all?" she murmured! The fatal mistake of that last night of Pierre Dumont's life returned to accuse her. "I will!" she cried.

For, at night, when the winds howled over the steppe, —her vodki sodden husband sat late with old Moschka, the Jew rag merchant, and the peddler, and talked with a gaunt, homeless fugitive who crept to the station to drown his remorse with the fiery alcohol!

The man, boor, brute and murderer, who had set the snare to take Pierre Dumont's life.

For the love of the man who had once walked with her in the white moonlight, Xenia, the one time village beauty, now drudge and slave, vowed to use all a Russian peasant woman's cunning to guard her new master— and to avenge the beloved dead.

Born a serf of the Dumonts, she hated the prosperous dwellers in the meadow below who gained roubles where the humble Post Station received kopeks.

Only the footsore plowmen and reapers from Kief,— only the Jewish wagon peddlers, and tramping peasant,— the conscript and the returned soldier,—the shepherd and the moujik wayfarer, halted at the bleak little station on the hill.

But, the riddle was plain to her, at last.

"I must be careful!" Xenia mused, as she returned to her drudgery. Her husband had been a serf of General Radovich at Bratskoe—and—she knew that death or maiming awaited any manifestation of sympathy with her old masters.

A grim smile played upon her features.

"Moschka will tell me all!" she reflected. For, she was the custodian of the vodki carboy, and her little traffic of rags, feathers, wool and peltry was safe from her drunken husband's eye! "Yes! Moschka will tell me all!" she cried, as she lost sight of the retreating carriage upon the snow-clad steppe.

The stern-faced Excellence Barbe was thinking of but one thing, as the Tartar gravemounds glided by. "My

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boy! My boy!" throbbed in every pulse of her intrepid heart!

Serge's telegram had told her that the Chevalier Garde would still have an officer of the proud old blood! The lonely patrician woman had already canvassed in her mind, all the great heiresses of the Kherson.

"Not now,—not yet!" craftily decided the widow, "but, after Easter, I will ask Serge to come and visit me! He must marry, and lead the noblesse of the Ukraine!"

In her fond fancy, she saw her own spirited son, in ten years, a Battalion Chief of the Empress' Own! and, Wassili should go onward and upward to honors, and—a place near the throne.

Rosy dreams of the future stole into the proud old lady's heart.

The anxious mother never knew how Vera Orbeleff had pleaded with a leaden-eyed voluptuary to release the hot-headed young officer from the doom of ten years' service as a Lieutenant in the Siberian Battalion.

But, the Petersburg élegante had gaged herself, body and soul, to soften the anguish of the sister of the man whom she had loved from afar,—the one fixed star of her stormy life.

Two weeks later, Madame Federoff's beautiful mansion on the Kovalevska faubourg was dressed en fête, for the telegraph had noted Serge's arrival at Krinkov, and, Lieutenant Wassili Federoff was even now, once more clad in cuirass and eagle-crested helmet, on guard at the Winter Palace.

There was no happier heart in the seventy thousand dwellers of Elizabethgrad, the beautiful city which leaped into life in 1754 at a mere whim of Peter's ambitious daughter, the easy-going Empress Elizabeth.

The bells were gaily ringing from the clustered domes of the dozen churches on a fête day, the Imperial Palace of the city was crowded with an assembly of the noblesse —as Excellence Federoff waited, in her carriage, in the grand park, two miles from the bastioned walls, till her outriders on the road should bring to her side, the new Lord of Khaminavatka.

Together, drawn tenderly heart to heart, the brother

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and sister drove back to the gaily illuminated mansion, where all the domestics waited to salute the rising sun, the new head of the lordly line of the Dumonts.

The first care of the new Lord of the Manor was to telegraph to Bratskoe, for Intendant Boursakoff to send carriages and a dozen Cossacks out to meet him at Elizabethgrad.

A well mounted lad always awaited at Bratskoe, the post and telegrams for the now desolate Chateau de Khaminavatka.

When the brother and sister had finished their heart communing, Major Dumont remembered that in some strange way, he had neglected to describe Vera Orbeleff's risquée evening call, and her mysterious agency in Wassili's return.

"Women never seem to understand these things! It is just as well!" mused Serge, tugging at his moustache. And—the new lord forgot also to tell of his compact for peace in the future.

The greater nobles of Elizabethgrad were astonished at Serge Dumont's calm demeanor, in their visites de cerèmonie, for all these fiery nobles had decided that blood would flow upon the arrival of the young veteran, whose valor had been proved as a boy, carrying the Czar's colors at the Alma. The lex talionis was their only law.

Only one gilded youth, the wild Prince Cheremetief, hazarded a meaning sally. "If you are lonely this winter, Dumont, you should make peace with la Baronne Radovich! There is but one beauty in Kherson! The little Baroness Magda is the star in our winter skies! Happy man! You are the nearest neighbor!"

The Lord of Khaminavatka coldly answered, "I have two thousand souls, and twenty thousand acres to watch over! I shall become the 'country gentleman' for once and all! The mazurka and the sword go together, out of my life!"

"Ah! You will pose for un homme sérieux," sneered the wayward young prince. "Time enough for that when you are fifty! Remember, the old saw, 'Si la jeunesse savait—si la viellesse pouvait!' I will give you just six

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months to surrender! I may ride over and see you! There's only eight nobles in two hundred square miles!"

Serge Dumont had murmured something about a year's mourning, and, the light-hearted, boyish Prince galloped away, a superb figure on his splendid Ukraine charger, followed by two beautiful ghostly white Russian harehounds, with dark pleading eyes, the very poetry of animal beauty.

Anxious to reach his birthplace before the wild winter storms might hide the tracks over the naked steppes, Serge Dumont drove eagerly down through the crowded market to take up a new life and enter on a wider sphere of human duty!

The gilded luxury of Petersburg, with the pompous laziness of palace life, had palled upon the spirited soldier, whose blood had bounded at the "pas de charge," and whose pulses leaped up to the sound of the singing bugle! The idle roulade of fashionable vice, the too easy intrigues of the boudoirs of the Neva left all the mechanism of a vicious life à la mode exposed! The trap was ever visible, even if the bait were gilded. And—there was a fresh and vigorous sensation in the cool blasts of the steppe.

The storks had already left their village haunts and were winging their way toward Egypt,—the trees were now bare and leafless,—as Serge Dumont traversed the bleak, snow-clad steppe.

His sister's last sage counsels were still ringing in his ears, even the message of the sorrowing Xenia had been faithfully delivered, and stout Nicolas Boursakoff added his hint! "Xenia will know if there was any foul play! She was a beautiful 'hexe' once,—a village witch! It is a good soul—and—her advice is right.

"The Barin must not ride the steppe alone! We shall see what God sends us!"

The young noble gazed earnestly at the honest, red-faced Kherson peasant! Nicolas, the Intendant, was master of every trick of the Cossack, every peasant wile, every art of the Little Russian. Serge laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

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"Do you think that my brother was foully dealt with?" he suddenly demanded.

"Nitchevo!" dubiously answered Nicolas, crossing himself. "It was the Devil's work that he left me that night! He would drive those devil horses. We shall see!"—and—not another word would he utter.

The young soldier noted the Intendant's advance and rear guard, of armed Cossacks,—the trailing flankers,—and he held his peace.

He was now going out into the wild life of the trackless plains, his birthplace, where men and women were rugged and real, compounded of his own natal dust! "Nicolas!" abruptly queried the young Excellence, the madcap Prince's words haunting him. "Have you ever seen the young Barina Magda?"

The stout servitor slowly said, "A day star—an angel from heaven is she!"

And, strange thoughts of his enemy's daughter haunted Excellence Serge Dumont long after he had passed through squalid Novokrainka, and, until in a blinding snowstorm, he drove up to the door where Xenia, his brother's silent worshiper, watched for his coming with burning, tender eyes.

There was a crowd of wayfarers thronging the Post Station, and a brutal husband dogging the anxious woman's every step. Before the horses had rested, and Serge Dumont had eaten Tourko's cosy dinner, Xenia stole to his side.

"If the Barin will remember me, when I send for you to come, I shall have something to tell you!" Her finger was on her lip, and her haunted eyes betrayed a mortal fear.

A strange suspicion took possession of the startled man's soul! He was nearing the place where his brother had been done to death! "I will have the Intendant pass here, once a week," he said, in a whisper. "You are of our village! He can send out a khibitka, and you can always come back to your old home! There—you can come to the chateau and, see me!" The woman's bosom heaved with a sudden emotion and raising the young officer's hand, she kissed it, in serflike fealty.

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"Trust to Xenia! You shall know all yet!" she timidly said, and—faltered, "Never ride the steppe alone! There is the mad Radovich—and——"

She fled away, as a hoarse voice called her, and Serge Dumont drove gloomily down into the Valley of Death. He was haunted by grisly visions of an unpunished murder.

There was no word spoken as Boursakoff drew up the chafing steeds. Through the blinding snowflakes, down the glen, the Lord of Khaminavatka could see the rugged cairn, with its outstretched cross, marking the spot where his unavenged brother died.

At his side, bare-headed in the storm, stout Nicolas Boursakoff, with trembling lips, murmured a prayer—as he crossed himself in memory of the dead!

Serge Dumont leaped from the carriage and clambered down the steep cliff to where his brother's body had rested, in his dying agonies. The young Major, now the Lord of Khaminavatka, pressed his lips to the rude cross.

"Barbe suspects nothing, thank God!" he murmured, for the strange conduct of Xenia had opened the door to the gravest suspicions of foul play.

Twenty-two years younger than the dead Marechale de Noblesse, Serge was at the Military School when Pierre Dumont had unconsciously captured the burning heart of Xenia, the proud Kherson village queen.

"There is some mystery in all this!" he sadly mused, as he climbed the cruel stone-fanged hill to his carriage, and gave the signal which bore him whirling on through storm and drift to that palace of the steppes, in which he was born.

"Princess Vera's fine hand has been in this whole affair," he reflected. "It is she who has had our friend Prince Youresief nominated as the new Marechale! This and Wassili's recall will prevent any further clash of the Dumont and Radovich clans."

"The Intendant seems frightened—and—this child of the steppes, Xenia—alone—seems to have a hint of the hidden deviltry. I must see her soon—and—alone!"

His impending loneliness dawned upon him! The near presence of three embittered enemies. As for Gen-

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eral Andrè Radovich, and the Baron, the vendetta was a heritage dearer than all their rich lands on the Mertvovod!

There was, too, the disgruntled duelist, the severely wounded boy lying at St. Petersburg. But, more dangerous than all of these—was "The Mad Radovich"—the younger brother of the two dignitaries, who had riotously thrown away a superb inheritance.

At thirty-five, Baron Arcady Radovich was a broken and ruined spendthrift. Gambling, horse racing, little trips to Nice and Paris, not unattended—gypsy girls, and fantastic follies had left him a charge upon his two brothers.

Careless in dress,—sunk to be the associate of peddling Jew and prosperous moujik, the ruined young noble was already the hero of two fatal duels, and the disgrace of his family name.

"Wassili!" thought Major Dumont, as the flying steeds crowned the hill! "He might resign and come and live with me."

But, the new Lord of the Manor recalled the stern pride of the stately widowed mother. Barbe Federoff had laid away all the savings of fifteen years to gild the marriage of her son, with some dainty, princely Petersburg heiress.

There had always been a Dumont in the Chevalier Garde since the glorious holocaust of Austerlitz! The rival house had their son and heir in the Preobajenskys—and—Barbe Federoff dreamed of seeing her stately son, standing, sword in hand, beside an Empress of Russia at a Moscow Coronation.

The lonely night winds wailed around the young Lord as he swept over the well remembered steppes toward his palace.

"There is old Major Peter Petrovitch Assamoff"—he reflected—"a one-legged regimental hero of Inkermann will surely not fear these fellows. I will ask him to spend the winter with me—as my Secretary. He will be another face at the table—at any rate!"

But, a stern family pride overcame the lonely patrician,

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as he recalled his stately brother's noble career of twenty years.

"I will follow in his footsteps—and—carry on his work alone,"—he vowed.

For, the swift chargers had now borne him along over the well remembered plains of his boyhood.

Serge knew them well in the dreary, wolf-haunted ghastliness of the winter snows,—in the emerald blush of the budding spring,—in the dreamy solstice splendor of the early summer when man and maid were bewitched with love's soft craze.

He recalled the bare, brown autumn when the shorn fields opened their bare bosoms to the chilling blasts from Lapland and the Urals! A panorama of Dame Nature's every mood.

But, Serge Armand Dumont loved the steppe, with all the singular devotion of the Russian country noble. There, the great white stars hung splendid lamps of love on high, in the sapphire night!

He had often hidden, himself, a frolic boy, in the half-grown, rustling wheat! He had walked into the maze of ripened stalks as a six-footer, and—been lost to his laughing friends.

"There is a wild life of our own here"—he murmured—and, he reflected that he was "primo inter pares!" "Here I devote myself—to a life on the Dying Water!" he vowed.

His heart throbbed strangely as he descried, after two hours' driving, the great avenue of Khaminavatka's plantations stretching out, its noble line for miles, due north into the trackless steppe. Then, the cross forests, now leafless, whose every tree had been nurtured with care.

Boursakoff chirruped to the flying steeds as the great windmills appeared, their silent arms gleaming ghostly in the starry night.

Down a gentle slope, past the hills crowned with Tartar grave mounds, the road led between vast storehouses,—then the huge barriers of the sheepfolds, the long masonry walls of the great stables, and there—to the left, nestling in the valley of the Mertvovod, was the peasant

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village, with twinkling lights in every window! For the Lord of the Manor was expected!

They had left the village of the German colonists a mile to the west, where twelve hundred souls slumbered in the unthinking rest of the tired peasant hind.

They were now in the great square before the main gates of the chateau, and, Serge Dumont could hear the rushing of the waters in the glen below, sweeping down to join the Bug, now a mighty torrent roaring to the sea.

There was the Intendant's office, and the bronze bell was clanging a mighty peal as every window of the square of the workshops leaped into living light! A hundred wild Cossack sheep dogs added their fierce clamor to the notes of the bell, and—distant echoes, across the Mertvovod—there—beyond the blue rolling line of the far hills told the young Lord that his foemen's night guardians were also awake. He was now on the line of the debatable ground—his foe's stronghold in sight.

The huge gates of the chateau courtyard were quickly swung open, and a cheer went up from five hundred throats as Serge Dumont alighted at the grand entrance at the northwest corner of the chateau.

Serge rubbed his eyes as the whole beautiful lines of the palace of the steppes sprang out in golden radiance against the soft blue murky darkness. He saw a huge four-storied castellated chateau of three hundred feet upon a side, traced out in lines of living fire—a fairy spectacle.

The vast basements were groined like a fortress. Builded of hard red brick, cemented in gray finish, the octagon tower on the southwest corner,—My Lady's Bower,—and the superb greenhouses on the eastern front told of tender solicitude for the white-bosomed rulers of this Paradise of the Steppes.

The whole household was marshaled there in the great library, as Serge Dumont received the bread and salt upon the silver salver from gray-haired old Chuchinka, his childhood guardian.

He knew every homely face,—the Gardener,—the Master of the Stables,—the Foreman of the Mechanics,—

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even the pretty Anna Ivanowna, the niece and destined successor of Chuchinka, the housekeeper, and—as he passed on with a word to all, in the great salon, the priest from Bratskoe and the Chief of Police, brave in his best uniform, awaited him, with the governmental physician.

There was a superb feast set out in the great dining room, through whose glass-panelled eastern walls, the magnificent wealth of the greenhouses was visible!

They led the new Lord of the Manor to his place at the head of the table! But, as he gazed upon the welcome banquet and laid his hand upon his brother's chair—

> "The room seemed filled with whispers,—"
> "As he looked at the vacant seats."

For, of all the bright and loving band who had gathered around the old mahogany, in the dear old well-remembered days—there was not a beloved eye left to shine tenderly upon him, not a voice to speak the name dear to him in childhood.

Calling Tourko, Major Dumont hastily said, "I will use my mother's rooms! Attend me there!" His military shadow, grizzled old Sergeant Michael Michaelovitch, was already standing "on duty" behind his master's chair.

Calling Nicolas Boursakoff—the Intendant,—the Lord of Khaminavatka said, "Take my place and,—do the honors."

The physician, chief of police and village pope were already seated at the table. Preceded by two servants with silver candelabra, through respectful lines of silent attendants, the young man moved on, as in a dream.

Around him in tall glass cases, was displayed the magnificent plate of the Dumonts; his foot alone echoed on the inlaid floor, as he left the dining room, for a sudden hush had fallen on the company.

On, through the great drawing rooms, their ceilings frescoed to depict the starry heavens,—pausing before bust and picture,—before martial bravery and fading loveliness, the young master moved slowly, wrapped in the tender mantle of his boyhood memories.

There in the great library, with its columned volumes,

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—its twenty thousand silent voices of the mighty dead,—he paused, and sighed for "the touch of a vanished hand and,—the sound of a voice that is still."

In all the sudden splendor of his altered fortunes,—in all the easily devolved wealth of a half dozen manors,—Serge Dumont's heart went back to the unforgotten days of life and love here—at Khaminavatka. And, he was, in heart, a boy again!

And, moving as one in a dream, he passed on through room after room, haunted with vanished loveliness, sighing, "I have been so happy here—so happy—a double happiness for—she was with me." He remembered his first sweetheart. The strong soldier shuddered as he moved up the grand staircase, for the great hall clock seemed to signal with its hollow ticking—"Never again—never again!" The pretty little countess whom he had worshiped as a boy of seventeen loves, had joined the choir invisible.

His heart stopped beating as he recalled loving arms which had once clasped him here, under the vaulted dome of the grand old chateau, builded with two interior galleries around the interior dome.

The last fibre of his heart was thrilling with unforgetting and unrequited love as he murmured with white lips, "There is nothing left to live for now." For, in the lonely night, the shadows of the vanished joys fell darkly upon his struggling heart. He murmured, "There must be some light shed upon my life—I should go mad here! This old castle is haunted with the memories of the beloved dead who have only left silence and gloom behind them."

They left him alone, in the beautiful salons, sacred to the memory of his gracious and beloved mother! The stout old sergeant well knew his master's moods!

A samovar,—a crust of bread,—a glass of wine and water made up the soldier's frugal supper, while from below rang out the merry voices of the guests who honored the new master's coming.

Standing at the western window, Serge Dumont could see the gleaming in the soft dusky night, of the chapel walls, there over the glen so dear in his boyish days.

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His never-forgotten mother,—his stately father,—his noble brother, the soldier of Inkermann, and Pierre, too, all lay there, lost in the darkness of unbroken dreams, of undisturbed rest.

He gazed around the rooms whose very walls had voices, and—as the peasants in the courtyard broke into the plaintive chorus of the sad songs of Little Russia, the new Lord laid his brows upon his mother's table and forgot the present—in a heart-wakened memory picture of the past!

For, Love had consecrated every niche of the great palace of the steppes to the man who had heard there, in his happiest days, the voice of tenderness and whose lips had thrilled to the kiss of unselfish love.

"He will be a good master, the Barin," cheerfully exclaimed the stout Intendant Boursakoff, when the Major's factotum brought downstairs an order to regale the peasants ad libitum.

And—so it fell out, while the patrician walked the floor into the night watches, the happy toilers made the night a memorable one. For—there was a new hope to them —in the young soldier's hearty liberality.

In the dining room, Boursakoff, with his three guests, drank the foaming champagne and toasted the new master. "It will be lonely here, Nicolas," slyly muttered the village pope as he passed his glass.

His face was a replica of the pictures of the beloved disciple John! His long golden hair framed his blue eyes and saintly visage with meek majesty.

Alas! For, the saintly ideal! Father Adrian was only thinking of the basket of champagne which was the gift de rigeur for a sacerdotal visit, and hoping that Boursakoff would not fail to strap it on his little pony droschky.

"If—if—the Barin would make it up, with Barina Magda Radovich," mumbled the Chief of Police, who was drinking "on a system."

"Madness!" cried the Bratskoe Doctor, striking the table with his hand. "There is blood and hatred in the mother's milk of these enemies." "Love plays strange tricks, in the month of May," stubbornly cried Nicolas Boursakoff. "Hatred is only cold love,—turn it over

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and warm it—it glows like a redhot horseshoe! We shall see—we shall see!"

The lights were one by one put out at last, in the great courtyard, the ferocious Tartar sheep dogs crouched at every corner,—the night watchman with noisy rattle and deafening cry made his hourly rounds,—for—there were hundreds of thousands of roubles of property exposed in the great thatched-roof storehouses, every one with its ladder ready, for stripping the roofs in case of fire, in the treeless and waterless land.

The palace of the steppes was left silent, save for the slipping bare feet of the forty pampered domestics,—some seeking the wine bins,—some stealing away to love rendezvous,—and others huddling together to talk in the dark of the stern-faced young Barin.

The drowsy watchman, stealing back after a visit to the rejoicing peasant village, only four hundred yards to the east of the chateau enclosure, was astounded to see a tall figure in the tower over the southwest corner of the huge darkened palace of the steppes.

In the eerie midnight, the half-tipsy Cossack fell upon his knees and crossed himself, for the "sheeted dead" seemed to have returned to revisit the glimpse of a straggling moon.

In all his future relations of this strange occurrence, the conscience-stricken moujik never dreamed that Serge Dumont was that night watcher! But, there he stood—sternly gazing across at his foeman's home.

Some spirit in his feet had led him to go over the vast old palace in the darkness, and his boyish memories soon led him to the lonely tower on the roof.

There, alone,—in the silent night,—the words of Nicolas Boursakoff returned to the agitated watcher.

He thought only of his enemy's daughter as he watched the long line of lights marking out the Radovich mansion, two miles to the southwest, across the now raging stream.

Two red lights gleamed at the main gateway, a mark of an evening gathering.

"They make merry while I come to a lonely house!" bitterly mused Serge—for well he knew the red lights

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marked the path from Bratskoe, three miles due east to his enemy's stronghold.

"A breeze of morning moved"—his eye caught a fair, clear star, and the words returned to haunt him now. "She is a day star,—an angel,—is Magda Radovich!"

In the uneasy dreams of this first night of his suzerainty, Serge Dumont was haunted by the shadowy face of His Enemy's Daughter!

The clanging of the Intendant's bell at dawn aroused both the dwellers in the humble village, and the fortunate retainers in the palace sheltered there, in the sloping dell of the Mertvovod by the plantations fostered for three generations.

Boursakoff started, in surprise, as he made his first morning round, to see the martial figure of his new master, standing equipped for riding, on the grand south outer stairway leading down into the gardens.

The old Sergeant had already found a cup of coffee for the restless Lord of the Manor, and the three sought the stables to pick out Major Serge's riding animals from the forty Ukraine horses awaiting him there.

"I'll take your choice, Nicolas," kindly said the Major. "Let a horse be saddled for Michael! Get your own and I will ride around the lines with you."

Already from the village, came the lowing of herds, the bleating of sheep and the confused sounds of village husbandry, for the peasants, under the new laws were already master of their Mir lands, and,—their four-footed possessions were waxing great! In this unfenced prairie, stretching for hundreds of miles, only white corner stones separated the fields of lord and village commune.

In a brisk half hour's morning walk, Major Dumont had already inspected two thousand superb sheep, and twelve hundred sleek cattle, with a breeding herd of three hundred horses.

"I find all in superb order, Nicolas," remarked the young Barin, as he noted the enormous stacks of straw fodder,—the huge pyramids of corn husks—and the enormous piles of valuable wood, painfully dragged from

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Bessarabia, or hauled from the sporadic forests of lower Kherson.

"It is all the work of Barin Pierre," said the Intendant, stifling a sob. "We look to you—alone, now, two thousand souls! You will need a month to inspect the storehouses, magazines and shops. We have fifty thousand poods of rye bread,—there is the wool,—the grain,—the stores for two years,—the American field machinery,—the English-fitted shops."

While the Intendant spoke, Sergeant Michael had brought his master's furred riding pelisse, gloves and turban, and the three rode out into the village.

There was a model Kherson village, a monument to the dead Pierre's labors of twenty years.

Each family had a roomy one-storied cottage of sun-burned bricks, the exterior well cemented and neatly whitewashed.

Raised a few feet from the ground, with substantial board floors, and glazed windows, the gay curtains and window flower pots spoke of comfort within.

Cattle byre and sheepfold, the piles of fodder and compost fuel,—told of a provision for the winter.

As the Manor Lord rode through the village, the proud old Starost, met him bareheaded, and conducted him into the interior of notable dwellings.

The cheery corner oven stoves,—the piles of pillows,—the ceilings hung with yarn and tow,—the hissing samovars and corner Icons told of the modest thrift of the villagers. For while none were rich, few were poor in comforts.

In the long winter to come, men and women were to be busied with the home fabrication of every needed article of clothing, while, to the light of the rape-seed oil lamps,—the maids sang as they fabricated the matchless Russian linens, laces and embroidery. A humble congress of happy laborers.

"There is a pattern village," proudly cried Nicolas. "We buy nothing save a few needles, buckles and buttons—a little cutlery—and a few poods of iron and steel for the village forge.

"Everything else comes from the warm, black bosom of the steppe.

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"This thrift is all your brother's work—precept and example! And,—in thirty years,—the Chief of Police at Bratskoe has never taken a man or woman out of our villages."

Serge Dumont's clouded face brightened! "There must be a panacea for vain sorrows,—for useless repining," he mused, as he galloped down to the garden entrances to the south of his lonely steppe palace.

It came suddenly to him that in work,—useful occupation,—daily husbanding of his time,—he would find his surcease from useless grieving for the inevitable blows of misfortune. "I shall follow in his footsteps," he vowed, as he sped on through the now leafless arbors and orchards where he had played as a sun-burned child of the steppe. And his heart grew lighter as he rode on with wind-blown hair.

The path led around below the chateau, with its noble southern façade, past the flight of marble steps where his gracious mother had often gathered her delighted guests and familiars about her!

With a sigh he rode up the knoll, and crossed the head of the glen leading down into the magnificent park, where the blue lake gleamed out below him, with its Swiss chalet, all deserted, until the storks should return from Egypt. It was a noble park and pleasaunce ground.

The two followers were gravely silent, as the young noble sprang from his horse, and approached on foot, the octagonal chapel, whose groined roof and black marble pillars covered the beloved dead!

The Intendant, drawing a key from his bosom, silently opened the door, and there, alone on his knees before the exquisite marble altar, Serge Dumont prayed for the repose of the souls of those whose beloved dust reposed beneath his feet.

Raised on a huge mound, the temple stood over crypts entered by a subterranean tunnel, only opened when one of the family was gathered into the sacred circle of the departed.

In silence, the master guided his horse down the glen into the park of two hundred acres.

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Sheltered under the northern banks of the Mertvovod, the great trees sighing in the autumn winds recalled the loving provision of the gallant old Marquis Henri Dumont.

All was leafless and bare now—the formal alleys of the beautiful grounds knew no light foot of beloved woman, —the vista echoed to no merry shouts of bright-eyed children!

But, as their horses' hoofs rang out on the frosty earth, Serge Dumont could recall the dreamy splendor of the May nights, when the luxuriant foliage hid the chateau, as far as its airy citadel rising above the mullioned eaves,—when the voice of Pan was heard in the rustling reeds by the river, and bud and blossom, the blowing rose and laden bee told of the rapturous month of love.

His stern and rugged heart softened as he recalled all the witchery of these perfumed nights of summer, when the very steppe had its murmuring voices of peace and love, and poppy and blue cornflower wreathed the brows of the full-bosomed maids of Kherson.

He thought of the immortal provision of Nature—the years recurring "with an equal splendor"—the artist hand of God—with a "touch impartially tender," making this lonely winter desert to blossom as the rose. The mad love of the steppe had come back in its olden charm.

He had galloped on in advance, through the lower orchards,—the wood plantations,—the nurseries and the outlying grounds silently, till from a high knoll, he looked across the barrier of the Dying Water to see Barin Alexandre Radovich's great walled enclosures, gleam out white and red, in the pale winter sun. It was an enchanting vista.

There, two miles away, was a vast square of buildings, with faint blue columns of ascending smoke. Huge mounds of straw, hay and fodder were traced along the frosty hillsides!

To the south, the gleam of a copper roof, the reflected sun from gaudy vane and gilded ball, told of the rambling old mansion of the Radovichs.

Across the dividing river was a straggling forest, the offshoot of the Khaminavatka park, for wind-blown seeds

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had sought the enemy's meadows to join, in a peaceful union,—the stately grounds of the palace of the steppes to the meadows and pastures of the Radovichs with a yearly increasing embryo forest of volunteer growth. And, so—Nature's truce shamed the bitter heart of man!

There was a walled enclosure, behind the distant mansion, My Lady's Garden!

The young noble's fancy returned to the Day Star of the Dying Water—the beautiful Magda.

"Do they remain here all the winter, Nicolas?" Serge absently demanded. "Yes! Barin," replied the Intendant.

"It is said the young Barina will not go to Court until next winter. They are not rich, but General Radovich has already secured a great contract for horses for the army for his brother, the Barin—and,—so—next winter, there will be chests of roubles in the old mansion."

It was after a fifteen-mile ride on his own grounds, that the moody young patrician returned to his first breakfast in solitary state. He was now called on to make his presence known to the nearest gentry, to go to Bratskoe and legally file his papers of succession, and to take on the daily cares of the lord of two thousand souls.

He dispatched a few letters and—then sat vacantly wondering in the library, if "Magda" was the heiress of the family hatred!

CHAPTER III.

EASTER EVE AT BRATSKOE.

Two months after the coming of the new lord of the manor, the whole of the Kherson noblesse knew the proud and dignified reserve of His Excellency Major Serge Dumont. It was a delicate attention of the venerable Prince Youresief to bring the élite of the vicinity to make a formal visit to the young recluse. And, royally were they welcomed.

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The only hiatus in the delegation of boyars was the narrowed clan of the Radovichs. And, no bright-eyed women mingled with the train of visiting nobles, as the stern Barbe Federoff was grimly keeping her mourning for a year. The stately hospitality of Khaminavatka honored even the traditional Russian and Polish welcome, which is incredible in lands of colder calculation. But, there was no fair patrician woman to welcome the visitors in the lonely red castle of the steppes.

In fact, even the new Marechale de Noblesse was glad to see the long line of sleighs at last ready to leave the courtyard, for, shadows clustered even around the sculptured fireplaces brought from far-away Italy.

Sturdy Boursakoff was a tireless representative of his sad-eyed master,—old Chuchinka, with pride, displayed the marvels of the Khaminavatka plate, crystal and linen. The choicest wines of Europe,—the rarest tobaccos of Syria and Havana,—all the treasures of larder and cuisine, failed to lift the gloom from every heart. But, the cup went round with no merry laugh—no bright-eyed women's smiles sweetened the foaming wine.

The men gathered in little knots, clinging to their intimates, in the corners of the grand old chateau, with its seventy vast rooms.

Vague rumors were whispered from mouth to mouth, for in this lonely, bookless prairie wilderness, whose superstitious peasants neither read nor write,—where a newspaper, even in original folds, brings a thrill of fear—the news travels abroad only through peasant gossips,—village visits,—chattering maids from the nearest chateau —lying governesses, drunken coachmen, or pert valets. The rare meetings of the clubs of the nobles alone offer an opportunity to exchange court gossip at second hand —or else the friends meet on infrequent visits.

The retainers of the visitors stole gladly out at night to join the village girls in their sewing congresses, where song and story,—jest and legend animated the flying fingers plying the needle with inimitable skill.

The larger village, five miles to the northeast of the gloomy palace, was populated with the descendants of the foreign German, Bulgarian, Serbian and Polish peasants,

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lured in as colonists by the large-hearted Catherine II.—following that dreamer Potemkin's gorgeous schemes of exploiting the wastes of New Russia.

And, soon alarming stories of the cause of Pierre Dumont's mysterious death were retailed by these heterogeneous dwellers,—neither serf nor peasant of the soil,—only cross-bred sojourners, in a strange gloomy land,—whose pall of silence,—whose weird loneliness chilled even the gay recruits from the marshy Danube. Mirth and laughter seemed to be silenced before the vast outspread loneliness of the Ukraine wastes.

Every moujik had his tale to tell,—every colonist,—some surmise of dark import.

One social feature confirmed these ugly stories, for Serge Dumont had been showered with medals, decorations and the civil grade of General and Excellence upon his retirement from the Chevalier Garde. It was a sort of salve to the wounded feelings of the bereft family.

But, all these were only barren honors,—apples of Sodom, and, clearly intended to isolate the young lord in a mantle of useless dignities. He was as cut off now as Napoleon on the gloomy rock of Saint Helena.

When all the visitors but the chivalric old Prince Youresief had gladly departed, the whole countryside knew of the grim silence of Dumont, as to his brother's death,—the cold aversion of the Radovichs,—and the singular solicitude of the Governor General of Kherson to maintain peace upon the lines of the Mertvovod. They had waited with bated breath for a second tragedy.

It had been at the solicitation of his host, that Prince Dimitri Youresief waited to escort young Dumont to Bratskoe, and to be his sole legal witness in the filing of the interminable legal papers so dear to the Russian heart.

They sat together in the great dining room, where the drawn curtains shut out the gleaming winter snows, lingering over the evening samovar, and, the ten o'clock light supper.

With due respect, the Intendant, Housekeeper and the pretty Anna Ivanovna had all retired—leaving the two nobles alone, over their cigarettes and fine champagne.

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The kindly old Marechale took his young friend's hands as they rose for the good night salutations. "I knew your noble father, Serge," he slowly said. "This will be a death in life to you—here! You are not the man to sink into the life of the country noble! You had a courier to-day!

"Tell me if I can help you! I am too old to advise! Advice is useless—you know it! You might go away for a couple of years! There is always—Paris—and, Boursakoff is a man in a million! You are rich,—young, —you may forget!"

The young Master of Khaminavatka smiled sadly. "I can not understand it all! To-day I learned that my nephew Wassili Federoff has been made Junior Aide de Camp to the Grand Duke Athanasius at Moscow. My sister Barbe has received the blue sash and a diamond-set order!

"Why all this? No! I have a work to do here—and,— I will stay and do it! My poor people must, at least, find a protector, if not a man to replace Pierre. For, I can learn to work—and—what I can not do, for myself, I may be able to do, for others."

He had grasped his old friend's hands, in a sudden access of gratitude, and—his lip trembled as he went to the window and slowly drew the curtain. There shone out before them the chapel, clear cut in the blue starlight. "That keeps me here!" he solemnly said.

With a quick intuition, old Prince Youresief pleaded with the stern young soldier. "Promise me, Serge—that you will not be rash,—that you will keep the peace,— here,—on the Dying Water." The old man was visibly affected, for he had heard of the drunken boasts of the Mad Radovich, the only man who had dared to revile the dead noble. And, the veteran scented blood!

"I have already made that promise, mon Prince, though—I know not why"—drearily answered the young Major—"but, I now renew it to you—as my father's old comrade and boyhood friend."

Serge had not dreamed of the artful tenderness of Vera Orbeleff who had hastened to separate the returned young duelist from his possible enemy, the heir of Serge's nearest neighbor—the brother of the Day Star.

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But, the stormy-hearted court beauty was secretly working far away, to repay her own unsettled debt of gratitude, and to guard and guide wherever her white hand could avert the clash of the rival nobles of the lonely Kherson.

Prince Youresief felt a load lifted from his heart as he read the truth in the young man's eyes. "I can only trust to you, Serge—not to them—and,—so, I sleep content!"

The courtly old noble sought his room after one last appeal, "This lonely life must be lightened! You know our quaint Little Russians,—our stubborn New Russians.

"Sad, stolid, patient,—devoted,—even their songs are melancholy! When Summer folds her golden wings—there is the chill autumn.

"The dead winter, the stormy spring! You must have women's faces around you! You are no coq du village! You would not lead an ignoble life?"

Then, Serge smiled sadly. "Work is my panacea! I thought of having an old regimental friend come. But, why doom him to a St. Helena of the steppes. I have here our own magnificent library.

"Barbe sends to me all the reviews and journals. Boursakoff and I are busied every evening with our campaigns for the production of wheat, millet, buckwheat, rape seed!

"There is the peasants' work to allot,—the accounts,—the machinery,—the stores. I have laid out a regular campaign! With old Chuchinka and that bright niece of hers, I am proposing now to inspect the whole contents of the chateau.

"Our family papers,—the pictures, the dear memorials of the beloved women of our race,—and—when I can face it—there are all of Pierre's papers to arrange—a sacred duty.

"And—moreover, I will have two daily trips afield when the spring plowing begins. There is also the park,—the gardens,—and the plantations to inspect! Besides this,—the care of our cattle, sheep and horses all furnish varied occupations!

"So—my dear old friend, I now take up as a sacred

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duty, the round of work which is the peasants' destiny. And—mon Prince, it is not always winter,—you know! Our lonely steppes have their carpet of flowers,—the nightingale sings sweeter here in Kherson, than by the Bendemeer." There was an air of resignation, if not of content, on the brilliant young soldier's face.

The old Prince walked slowly up the grand old staircase, and, a memory of forgotten springs, of summer days long fled was in his shaking voice, as he softly said, "It is not always winter,—no—not always,—winter!"

He was going soon to the shore where it is always night, but, as he parted with the gallant young noble, he wondered what beautiful woman, with softly shining eyes, would come, with springing step and gleaming, graceful form, to chase away the winter from Serge Dumont's heart. The old man dreamed strange dreams that night!

In his younger days, he himself had waited, with beating heart for a gliding footstep, in the old chateau here, in the brave spring time of his life! A generous, loving heart had beaten upon his own, here, in the mingled ecstasy of an unforgotten love,—and,—down below the lonely steppe palace,—there,—in the shaded park, she had stolen out to meet him, bringing eternal sunshine in her smile and the promise of heaven in her steadfast eyes!

But,—long ago, the cruel steppe had called back the beloved to its cold embrace, and the long grass had withered for many a long year above the silent heart which had once beat for him alone!

And—the old house was still haunted with her gracious, abiding presence, so,—the lonely dreamer whispered in his uneasy sleep. "I have been waiting, Duischinka—for you—so long,—so long!"

When Prince Youresief parted with his host, next day, at Bratskoe, he bore away Serge Dumont's promise for a lengthened return visit at his own magnificent domain of Bobrinetz.

With true Russian craft, Prince Youresief gave the Intendant his own secret orders as to Serge Dumont's safety. Boursakoff pointed to the dozen well-armed

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Cossacks and grimly said, "There are twenty more on the road! There will be no more accidents!"

"Do you think!"—began the startled noble, but, the stout Intendant stolidly crossed himself. "I know,—I think nothing! It is all as God wills! I am only a poor fellow Christian," and,—the Prince forebore to add to his own forebodings or strengthen the rumors growing blacker daily. For, he well knew that spy and lounger were watching them now, keenly.

The official business was duly achieved without any awkward rencontre, though from the straggling main street of Bratskoe, with its gaudy wooden church,—and unkempt Post Station,—the fine villa of General André Radovich was clearly visible.

Within the massive walls, the old soldier voluptuary had gathered up the spoils of many a visit to happier lands beyond the far frontier. A fortunate bend of the "Dying Water" fertilized the beautiful gardens of the Emperor's Aide de Camp, and, statues of mystic import gleamed in the bosky grounds.

Strange tales were told by peasant man and maid of the orgies in that Liberty Hall, when the tables gleamed with the gamblers' gold,—when the lips of lawless Love kissed the bubbling champagne, and the Tzigane girls, in their wild abandon, recalled the Islands of the Neva, to the circle of mad boyars gathered around André Radovich's board.

A few villagers and peasants gazed out from the double windows of the low masonry houses, at the passing equipages of Prince and Excellence, and,—in the little vodki shops, the loungers talked with bated breath of the coming of the new Barin.

In the two thousand dwellers of the little Kherson market town, there was not one who knew not now the whole story of the vendetta,—for, the tide of sluggish years had only blackened the hatred between the Dumonts and the reckless Radovich clan of the Danube. It was the one stock in trade of the unwearied local gossips.

Serge Dumont was a knightly figure as he said adieu to his beloved Mentor, while the Chief of Police, with

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pride, marshaled four of his eight rural gens d'armes to escort Prince Youresief on his homeward way.

As they clasped hands for the last time, a splendid sleigh, drawn by four wild black steeds swept out of the alley leading to General Radovich's villa.

There was no mistaking the two men on the front seat. The General's flat gold shoulder knots bore the Imperial eagle, and both Serge and his guest touched their hats to the visible mark of the White Czar's personal dignity! For the Czar's trusted servants divide his awful majesty.

A gleaming pair of roving black eyes kindled at Prince Youresief's courtly salute, for Madame la Baronne Radovich was still "un peu coquette."

Serge Dumont hardly noticed the slender form beside the fur-clad matron—for the girl's face was hidden in a Russian filmy winter veil, but, the Prince gravely said, "Mademoiselle Magda expects her wounded brother to remain until Easter, so I am told! She should really be at court, the winter is long enough here!"

As the Master of Khaminavatka drove swiftly homeward, the old Prince followed him with his kindly eyes. "It is not always winter,—I hope not, my brave Serge," he muttered as he drove out to face a thin, fierce, scattering snowstorm. And, Excellence Serge returned to face the speaking loneliness of his home.

The returning guests were now all well on their homeward way, traveling in little knots of intimates, and, they bore with them many stories of the haunted chateau of Khaminavatka.

Brave men spoke of doors that were opened and shut by no human agency,—of heavy-treading feet,—of strange sounds in the state chamber—of soft, wailing sighs, and of gleaming nebulæ of light in the darkened rooms. Bold enough when dashing over the steppe, watching for prowling wolf, or "illegal man," these brave nobles were all tinctured with the superstitions of their Kherson foster-mothers, and they gave credence to the ghostly legends.

Tales of the familiar spirit of the house,—the Domovoy,—legends of the youth-destroying Rusalkas,—stories of the weird Vodyany, were bred in the bone with these

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fearless boyars, whose lonely half-million square miles of steppe is marked with the twenty thousand Kourganes whose heaped-up mounds cover Greek and Byzantine, Nogay Tartar and the fierce sons of Genghis Khan. A land of tombs and lost histories!

"It is not all right at Khaminavatka," was the ominous verdict which soon spread itself from one end to the other of Kherson.

And—yet—no man dared to formulate these growing rumors in direct charges,—mere suspicions were baseless,—but, to the four winds was carried the uneasy query, "What will Serge Dumont do?"

The villagers of Khaminavatka did not hesitate to affirm that mystic lights danced around the lonely family chapel, and, that the rude cross on the cairn where Pierre Dumont died had been seen all aglow with crimson fire, by affrighted travelers. The affrighted peasants shunned the spot where Death had dragged down their proud Lord!

But, one human being in the valley of the Mertvovod was ignorant of the rumors now carried on from tea house to Post Station,—spread abroad by the Starosts and "White Hairs" of the nearest Mirs,—and gossiped over with pilgrim and peddler, by the autocratic "elder women" of the villages where the snows now lay thick upon thatch and shed.

A sense of sickening isolation came over Serge Dumont as he walked his lonely library after his return from Bratskoe after parting with Prince Youresief. The important legal formalities of the day forced him, at last, to take up the duty of examining the working room of the man whose death had brought him a half dozen fiefs.

There were vast arrears of correspondence as to the other estates,—there were matters affecting the two thousand souls who had just been generously hurled out of a fixed slavery into an uncertain liberty.

A single stroke of the pen of Alexander II. had made twenty-two millions of serfs, as free before the law, as before their stern masters,—and, one-half of the arable land of Russia had been dedicated to the support of five-sixths of the subjects of a generous Czar, whose heart's

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blood paid the price of disturbing traditional conditions. The cold revenges of Fate for a golden deed of noble charity!

After his lonely state dinner, the young Lord directed the illumination of the hitherto sacred rooms. Seated at his brother's desk, he toiled alone, in an effort to familiarize himself with the work before him—a labor of love.

In the dining room, the Intendant awaited within call, the summons to aid his master.

The night was dark and murky, the cottony flakes of snow drifting down cheerlessly. Already the fierce watch dogs had been loosed in the courtyard and the rattle of the watchman was heard without.

The great room, hung with arms and trophies, was silent, and, every nerve of the young master was thrilled with the tension of loving memories of the man whom all mourned.

Suddenly, Serge Dumont sprang to his feet! There was a blast of cold air in the room,—a rattling of the casements,—the wild Tartar dogs without howled in chorus. A hollow voice seemed to whisper in Serge Dumont's very heart, "Come,—come quickly," a voice which froze his blood with fear.

With a single bound, the excited man was halfway to the door.

There he was confronted by Boursakoff, white-faced and trembling. By his side, a drenched and shivering object, stood a peasant lad of ten years. "Speak, young man! Speak out!" cried Dumont, starting at the sound of his own voice.

"She sends for you! Xenia!" faltered the Intendant. "Her husband is away at his village! He will be drunk for a week! The man you want is now there,—at the Post Station!" Boursakoff dared not raise his eyes to his master's. But, a mad desire for vengeance had entered the soul of the mourning brother.

"Take that boy to the housekeeper! He is to be kept here—and, treated like my son! Get out the sleigh, the best horses! Let no one know! Take robes,—arms,—

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vodki! How long will it take us to drive there?" It was the call of Fate! his soul was in arms!

"We came over from Bratskoe in a half an hour,—we can reach the Post Station easily in an hour!" harshly cried Boursakoff. "Where will you meet me?"

"At the stables!" Dumont cried. "Remember,—on your life, not a single word! Stay,—take lanterns,—put no bells on the sleigh."

"The wolves"—stolidly demanded Boursakoff. "Take all our dogs! They will quietly follow you," sternly replied Serge. "Go! Now!"

In five minutes—Serge Dumont leaped into the sleigh. He had caught up his hunting rifle, and grasped a heavy belt with both his army revolvers. Throwing on a huge hooded cloak, he had stolen out of the servants' entrance. And—no one had marked his exit!

With a wild snort, the horses sprang away, and, not a word was exchanged between the two men until they had cleared the fringe of plantations, two miles to the north of the chateau. It was a dark ride upon a nameless errand!

"Get down and light the lights now"—said Dumont, "for I want no shooting at the wolves." There was the ring of an anticipated vengeance in his harshly strained voice. "We can put them both out, when we get to the glen." As the Intendant grasped the reins, five armed Cossacks streamed out of the darkness like shadows.

"Back!" yelled Dumont. "Not so, Barin!" stoutly answered Boursakoff. "They can hide in the glen, and only come up to the Station when all is over. I have my whistle."

"Then,—not a shot to the wolves, men," fiercely said Dumont. "Use only your whips and your swords. The dogs will hold them off."

Away over the smoothly packed snow,—the silent cortege dashed madly along! The wind of night blew in their faces and congealed the beards of the two men in the sleigh!

It was a wild ride for life and death! For, already the wild-blooded coursers scented the wolves trailing

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along on either side when half the distance to the fatal glen had been covered!

The five Cossacks had stolen up to the flanks of the flying horses and,—streaming gallantly along—the great gray Ukraine sheep dogs showed their erected manes of coarse yellow and black hair. Their fierce eyes shone out yellow in the night and their triangular jaws were fanged with teeth ready to close in the death grapple upon the throat of any wolf bolder than his howling mates. Such an escort might be the train of the Wild Huntsman himself!

It was only at the edge of the fatal glen that the whole pack of hungered wolves madly dashed in upon the equipage. Serge Dumont never knew how the hungry beasts were fought off, for all the men were busy in that desperate fight!

Silently, the huge sheep dogs closed in upon the startled enemy, while the Cossacks with knout whip and sword disabled the boldest brutes.

Down through the glen, at full speed, the sleigh dashed on, the frantic horses eyeing the twinkling light gleaming from the Post Station on the hill beyond.

There was no sign of life in the farm houses in the meadow, and,—it was only Dumont and Boursakoff who knew that there beside that twinkling light, the faithful Xenia waited to keep her oath of fidelity to the man whom she had once loved.

The wail of the baffled wolf pack died away behind them,—the exhausted horses rested their bleeding limbs as they panted up the steep hill.

"Stop!" cried Dumont, and, called his retainers near him. "Four of you ride up and surround the house! You, Ivan, hold our horses! Boursakoff and myself will go in! Then,—all wait for my signal." And—none of the bold riders knew the secret of the dread quest.

They were nearing the Post Station now, and,—as Serge Dumont leaped from the sleigh, he saw a dark shadow lingering at the window of the squalid station. There, with her face pressed against the pane, Xenia waited for the sound of horses' feet!

Well she knew that only vengeance would bring any

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sane man out on the steppe, in this howling night, but, her heart burned with hotter blood than ever quickened the bosom of her who waits for the long-denied lover of her heart. She recalled the white moonlight of her girlish triumph—and,—her dead patrician lover!

The door gave way with a crash as Serge Dumont, his eyes ablaze with a merciless hate, leaped into the room, followed by Boursakoff, pistol in hand.

Two drunken moujiks lay prone in the corner on a pile of sheepskins, there were some children sleeping on the huge corner oven stove, and,—in a corner, by a blinking candle, old Moschka, the Jewish peddler, cowered over a vodki bottle with a forbidding-looking peasant.

Dumont sprang to Xenia's side, his hand upon his pistol belt! "Where! Where!" he hoarsely cried, and, as the woman raised her shapely arm, she cried, "That is the man, take him,—take him away!" But, with a frightened yell,—the startled scoundrel dashed through to the rear of the house and plunged down into a ravine. —Boursakoff dropped his pistol on its cord!

Dumont was on his heels in an instant, the Cossacks spurring their horses to the crested bank. "Don't shoot! I want him alive," yelled the noble. And then, the crazed fugitive fled away from the avengers of blood!

There was a rush,—the sweeping by of heavy bodies leaping madly along in the chase! The lacerated Ukraine sheep dogs, maddened with the taste of blood, their huge jaws opened, bounded down into the ravine!

There was a wild yell,—a chorus of savage growls,—a confused melée of struggling, maddened animals,—and then the sound of a frantic struggle for life below them!

It was five minutes before,—by the light of hastily caught up flambeaux,—the avengers of Pierre Dumont, reached the bottom of the ravine.

There was left only a hideous shapeless mass, torn beyond all semblance of manhood, for the wild Cossacks had cheered their ferocious dogs on to the chase of the fugitive, and only too well, had the wolf fanged brutes responded.

Serge Dumont was sickened at heart, when he returned to the station and lifting the senseless form of

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Xenia, bore her to the one corner of the hovel which was her own.

An hour later, the Lord of Khaminavatka drove down the glen under the escort of Boursakoff and three of the Cossacks.

Two remained to guard the devoted woman until, on the morrow, the Intendant could return and remove her and her two children to the permanent protection of the chateau.

In the intervals of her wild sobbing,—Xenia had disclosed her dangerous secret. She had seen Arcady Radovich often giving the dead brute money,—and, the Jew peddler Moschka had been the bringer of many secret messages! Since the death of Pierre Dumont,—the man who had just died under the fangs of the wildest dogs on earth, had been spending rouble on rouble in the effort to obtain drunken forgetfulness.—For, he had earned the right to divide Arcady Radovich's purse!

The old Jew peddler had scuttled safely away into the darkness before the station was thoroughly searched for him. "My husband knows nothing," sobbed Xenia, "he only wished this villain to spend his money with us—and —whoever was paying him, the murderer only lurked around here for safety and hiding.

"As for Moschka, the Jews never divulge their secrets! Fear will seal his lips, but, after the death of this man, I can not stay here! My husband would beat me to death! Say nothing—Barin, say nothing! They will think it an accident! How many poor pilgrims,—how many strange peasants—have been torn to pieces on the steppe by those fearful dogs! Give me a home at Kaminavatka with my boys! I will slave for you—and—perhaps some day—I may find out the rest! There is a peasant woman here to help Anton!"

Xenia's kisses were warm on the young noble's hand as he departed. "Remember," he kindly said. "You will have a home for life. and, your little boys shall be taken care of."

In silence, the tired horses picked their way down the glen, but, they trotted along merrily, for the storm was behind them. Serge Dumont felt the hand of Provi-

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dence in the singular accident which had balked his vengeance.

He was busied with making ready for the waiting wolves, as he passed the spot of the mysterious accident. It had been his intention to carry the suspected man away as a prisoner to Khaminavatka, and—first forearmed by Xenia's disclosures, to frighten all the truth out of the guilty wretch. But man proposes—and—God disposes! It was too late to question the past now!

For, now, all hope of direct evidence had vanished forever. He doubted not of some cowardly foul play! Perhaps an obstruction in the road, perhaps the harness craftily cut, or the carriage slyly injured.

There was now no certain clue save the fractious Orloffs whose equine memory forbade them to willingly pass the fatal spot, and, the sealed lips of that silent mangled wretch whose body was left to be buried on the steppe by the Cossack guard at daybreak, in a concealed spot.

The three outriders were now directed to freely use their carbines and pistols on the wolf pack and both Dumont and the Intendant soon found use for all their fire arms as they bitterly fought their way over the prairie back to Khaminavatka.

The gleaming lanterns aided in frightening the ferocious pursuers who followed stoutly over the snowy steppe until the roused dogs of Dumont's own village came out to aid the survivors of the courtyard guardians. For, it had been a sore battle—the Kherson wolf was king of the dreary winter night!

Three of the wild champions had been torn to pieces by the wolves, and the death of each of these grim fighters had allowed the sleigh to gain a well needed half mile toward safety—when they drove into the courtyard at midnight, the saddened lord of the manor, called his men around him.

"Not a word of this occurrence to any one! Each of you will have a twenty rouble note, when you return tomorrow with Xenia and her two urchins!"

Serge Dumont was safely hidden in his own room when he grasped Boursakoff's honest hand. "Take your

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rest, my brave friend! Get away to-morrow and bring the woman and her belongings safely here. A fifty rouble note will soon silence the husband.

"As for our own doings—God means that it should be buried in the silence of the grave—all this strange mystery of sorrow. We were too late!" When his tired head fell upon his lonely pillow, he murmured, "Arcady Radovich is only a half crazy debauchee! He may have hatched up this coward plot,—but,—the Barin,—the General,—they are surely above midnight murder!"

It seemed to him as if a sigh sounded in his ears, and he was awakened in the night by the loving pressure of a hand upon his brow. He was in the keeping of restless spirits in this sorrow darkened old chateau.

He sprang from his couch, lit the lights and kept a vigil until the dawn, for,—devoutly orthodox and superstitious,—he felt that the beloved dead were near.

Alone in his state chamber there, it seemed as if the eyes of his gallant brother moved in the picture which now shone down upon him from the wall. "We are but living ghosts, we poor hoodwinked mortals; to the beloved dead, all is known,—and they,—viewless to our eyes—may be more alive than ourselves." And, so saying, he knelt and prayed for peace for the beloved dead—for the unexplained murder had been terribly avenged.

The sickly gray of a winter morning awakened him, from a sleep of exhaustion, long after Boursakoff, stolidly silent, was half way to the Post Station to bring the anxious Xenia to a home of peace and plenty. It was hours before he decided to seal the whole affair in his bosom and prevent the declining years of his sister being racked with a vain sorrow.

With dogged resolution, Excellence Serge Dumont then applied himself to the labors of the cabinet, and vainly waited, day by day, for any inquiry as to the missing man or any suspicious movement of the concealed enemies behind the vendetta.

It was two weeks after the death of the wretched instrument of a coward vengeance, that Xenia,—now rosy and contented in her girlhood home—stole into the room where Serge toiled at his brother's papers.

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With downcast eyes, the faithful woman laid a twenty rouble bill on her master's desk. "My husband has sought me out here! He brought me this, from Arcady Radovich who wishes me to come over to Bratskoe and to see him. What shall I do?" She was pallid with fear. "They will kill me," she faltered.

"Xenia!" gravely answered her master. "If you ever leave Khaminavatka you too may be lost, on the way home! Send the Intendant to me! You are to remain within the lines of our village,—the park or my plantations.

"For I wish to know nothing more now, and,—you would surely lose your life. They only wish to find out the fate of that poor wretch—for their own safety. The vengeance of God can wait! I will guard you with my life! Remember, stir not a foot!"

An hour later, the humbled station keeper was escorted off the grounds by the Intendant. His interview with the young lord of the manor was a decisive one as to the future of Xenia and her children.

"Remember. Anton Antonovitch," sharply cried Serge Dumont. "You have beaten your wife half to death, and have starved your children. You can come once a year to see them at Easter, at my Intendant's house! Here is a hundred rouble note! Do not forget that our dogs' teeth are sharp.

"I hear that you have been selling unstamped vodki. Would you like to lose the Post Station?"

When the cringing scoundrel reached the end of the plantation, he turned and shook his fist with a vow of vengeance.

"I know whose rope threw your brother into the glen," he growled; "and there will come a day, when you shall die too!" But, all unconscious of his vile enemy's oath, Serge Dumont returned to his solitary labors.

He murmured, "If Arcady Radovich knew of that black deed, he now only wants to assure his own safety! Nothing could be proven, I must be content to protect this poor woman—and,—trust to time."

The gloomy winter days wore along, bringing to Serge Dumont a hundred varied occupations. His evenings

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were passed with Boursakoff the Intendant in arranging the vexatious questions arising from the Pandora gift of freedom to the serfs.

Sent at an early age to the Page School—thence to the Petersburg Military Academy,—the young noble was practically a stranger to his own people.

For court and regimental life was a glittering pageant,—a social Paradise, compared with the dull martyrdom of caste, imposed upon him among the snows of the steppe. And—he soon found that he had overestimated his power of filling up his own life.

The first duty of returning the ceremonial visits of his guests was later supplemented by a fortnight spent with Prince Youresief at Bobrinetz. The vast mass of Pierre Dumont's papers had been all digested after the labor of a month, and all the documents of the dead Marechale de Noblesse duly turned over to his successor.

It was the work of an accomplished polyglot to examine many documents from the officials, nobles and colonists of the eleven different nations now mingled in the Black Earth Zone,—and a score of dialects and varied tongues were spoken at the market fairs of Bratskoe. And grave lines of care now streaked the young officer's brow.

There were interminable conferences with men of the Zemstvo,—the village Starosts,—the Elders,—the Bratskoe pope,—the Chief of Police,—and all the varied agents,—commissioners,—valuers, and tchinoviks, attempting to set in motion the cumbersome plan of setting the sloted conservative serf communities into an autonomic motion. The work of Sisyphus, to drill liberty into the doltish ex serfs.

Timid,—ignorant,—dismayed by the loss of an accustomed dependence—the serfs had all neglected the fitting preparation for their own farming, many fell into drunkenness and others feared to make arrangements for carrying on the farming of the huge estates now crippled. It was confusion worse confounded—"The old order changeth, giving place unto the new"—and Serge's heart, brain and temper were sorely tried.

In all the new duties of managing his other estates,

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the young noble was aided by the acute experience of Madame Barbe Federoff, to whom the Intendants of the other estates reported.

This skilled help,—with many inspections of the distant estates by the faithful Boursakoff,—soon enabled the neophyte to carry on successfully his study of the so-called agricultural system,—the favorite three field plan,—and all the methods of revolving spring, summer, and winter crops as well as fallowing the weakened fields. And, he dismally toiled on alone with a dreary heart.

It was not long until Dumont learned that the Cossacks of the Don, Volga and Dneiper,—the descendants of Russian colonists by chosen Tartar mothers, were wise in their generation to confine their riches to superb flocks and herds, and, to avoid those pretentious attempts at agriculture which seemed to be foreign to the mysterious steppe. For, Nature, itself, seemed to be averse to the reconquest of the grass grown steppe.

The silent warfare of ages had conquered the forests eager to spread south and east—the gigantic grasses and annual plants leaping to life under the fervid summer suns had smothered all tree growth,—and, grain high enough to hide a horseman, grasses and weeds twenty feet in height, had been the marvel of his boyhood. The wind and sun aided to drive northward the trees from the bare plains.

There were other occupations for Serge Dumont in the lonely steppe palace than his daily routine of cares As the winter dragged away, he had with reverent hand. examined all the memorials of his patrician race.

Every corner and nook of the vast edifice had been visited, and, vacant chambers, full of dust resounded to his footfall, in the three storied galleries above which had been the old "terem" or woman's department, after the style of Peter the Great.

He marvelled at the forgotten riches,—at many quaint memorials of departed beauty,—at all the flotsam and jetsam of the waves of Time which had died away on the steppe.

There were storied relics of the Dumonts de la Roche which had escaped the bloody holocaust of the French

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Revolution,—touching memorials of the legitimist nobles who had hurled themselves into alien armies to revenge the murder of an anointed King. And gentle shades of the past returned to his romantic mind in gazing on these sacred treasures.

In these solitary rounds, gazing out of the dust encrusted windows at the distant family stronghold of his foemen,—the descendant of the gallant old French line murmured, "We are all sojourners here, interlopers! They are as truly to the manner born as I! The blood of twenty nations has watered these steppes, a very No Man's Land—only an open place of arms for battle and murder and strife!

If they belong to any one by right, it is to the Cossacks, who are descendants of the surviving first adventurers and their Tartar brides.

For back of their unwritten history is nothing but the funereal Kourganes, where mortuary vases, tear vials, a few ornaments, and crumbled weapons tell of the unconquered horsemen who ruled these lonely plains! The lost romance of races buried in the womb of Time!

In vain old Chuchinka had protested against yielding up even to the master her treasured keys. Basket after basket were reluctantly brought to light by the pretty Anna Ivanovna.

The old housekeeper grumbled "Seventy years I have seen the Easter sun here, and Barin Pierre never asked for a single key."

But the old woman yielded, for from Elizabethgrad to Odessa,—from Kharkov to Woloczisk, the fame of the stern silent young soldier had gone abroad as one who had a heart of gold and nerves of steel. All obeyed—and —all loved the honest, fearless noble.

Boursakoff vainly tried to instruct his young master in the forgotten legends of the old mansion. He was but a few years older than his lord, and his youth and manhood had been passed in the Intendant's home, without the chateau grounds, where he had succeeded his father.

A huge bronze bell hung in front of the comfortable structure both residence and office and, thereon, the

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Boursakoffs, father and son, had wakened the neighboring village for seventy years, at four in the growing dawn. Faithful and true, they were but sturdy yeomen.

In that time, every evening, at ten, by the samovar, in the great dining hall the Boursakoffs had taken the orders for the next day.

So, with due regard for his elder sister, Serge Dumont made no further effort to pry into the unwritten history of these vacant rooms, where burning love and keenest sorrows, Love's haunting handmaidens, had waited upon the fresh young hearts which had failed here,—in the dull round of icy winter,—glowing spring,—burning summer, and gloomy autumn.

For their heart histories, their silent sorrows, were all locked in the stilled hearts now crumbled back into steppe dust.

One day, in searching through two splendidly decorated rooms, on the east side of the chateau, on the highest tier, under the shadows of the lofty roof promenade and air well, Serge Dumont found a narrow door skilfully concealed behind the false screen of a great mahogany armoire.

It soon yielded to his vigorous blows and a gust of foul air made him quickly recoil. With a suddenly aroused curiosity, he descended and found that the walls were windowless without, the passage along the interior dome was without any doors,—and the whole masonry artfully concealed the very existence of rooms along a third of the eastern side of the third gallery.

In an examination of the roof he found three circular windows let into the ceiling, covered with broad platforms, long hidden with the wind blown sands of the steppe, and now crusted with ice.

Provided with candles, it was not long until the master stood within the secret apartments. He had carefully locked the doors behind him, spurred on by curiosity and yet, faithful to the unbroken seal of the dead years. For it seemed that he had no right to violate this secret haunt of his older progenitors.

He stood at last within two rooms filled with the debris

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of ancient furniture and marvelled at the completeness of the hiding place.

Memories of the old days when spy and secret agent lurked within even the highest family circles returned to him. "Perhaps a secret retreat where the hidden family matters could be talked over, free from spying eye—and, —far from eavesdroppers."

The chill fresh air drifted in from the windows which he had opened in the adjoining rooms, and he made haste to conclude his examination.

On the wall of the second room, a mouldering picture hung.

Serge tore it down and bore it out of the hidden chambers, carefully closing the bursted door and locking the old armoire which had perhaps made its procession from Paris to Poland, and down to the lonely steppe.

"This shall be my secret alone"—he murmured, as he detached the quaintly gilded key of the old armoire. For, by the dying light of the day he gazed upon the faded picture.

A woman's face was dimly shadowed there,—the pleading wistful eyes still bright with the reflected light of love.

"Ah! It was not always winter here!" the lonely man cried. "And Love led this beauty once to her hidden Paradise. A forgotten face—but, a woman with a heart, —for she loved—and, suffered—else, why this passion locked prison, under the roofs? And he marvelled at the wistful tenderness of that long forgotten face.

For days after, in his cabinet de travail, the young noble watched the pleading loveliness of that misty fading face, for, true to her tryst of the vanished years,—the Lady of the Picture faded away to join her dead lover behind the veil of the past. And, so Love avenged the violation of its sanctuary.

"She was young and beautiful—too young to have seen Love's roses fade! Pray God she died in an unbroken dream of happiness!" mused Serge.

And as he consigned the now meaningless canvas to the flames, he vowed to keep her secret from all men, as a tribute to the romance of the old.

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Not even Boursakoff, on his return from a voyage to Tambov, ever learned the history of this discovery, though the master returned by stealth to confirm his theory that some beloved one had lingered there in a bower where fond heart beat against burning breast.

The exterior had either been cunningly devised or else skilfully altered to hide the existence of the two rooms. And, whether fear, jealousy or necessity had led to the choosing of this refuge the young noble never knew—for the dead lovers guarded their secret—even in the tomb.

Serge Dumont's breast was stirred by strange news upon his Intendant's return. With a distrust of the post at Bratskoe, where every official was an adherent of the powerful Radovichs, the young noble's intimate correspondence was all sent to Excellence Federoff at Elizabethgrad, and, the stout henchman was full of news and important mail commissions as he dashed up to the door in his troika sleigh.

Even before he had fulfilled Madame Barbe's varied injunctions, with a grave face, Boursakoff told the story of an important discovery.

"Anton Antonovich, Xenia's worthless husband, has taken unto himself a wife ad interim, from the Radovich village.

"And I have learned through a faithful watch long set by me, that the woman is the sister of the man who was torn to pieces by our wild dogs on that awful night.

"The station keeper swears vengeance for the refuge that you have given to his wife. And—week by week, this mad fool Arcady Radovich, comes over to the farm houses in the meadows, and steals up to confer with Anton.

"They believe that you have spirited away her brother to bring him up in accusation of the Radovichs, for,—they know nothing of his death.

"And, old Moschka, too, has been haunting our villages for weeks, well supplied with vodki money and spending it with a lavish hand."

"How do you know all this, Nicolas?" gravely demanded his master. "I am to marry Marika," blush-

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ingly admitted the Intendant. "You know,—the handsome girl of the little village in the meadows—and,—she is good and true to me!

"For God's sake! Barin, be watchful; they mean to do some harm to you! I shall see that you do not ride the steppe, alone!"

Serge Dumont was striding impatiently up and down the room. "So! They do not even know the man is dead! True! Old Moschka fled to the front—the other two men were in a drunken stupor, and,—Xenia is as true as steel! They must never know! I thank you—and,—Marika shall have the handsomest outfit in the Kherson!" And, long they talked of the means to circumvent the desperate clan.

It was an hour later when the two men separated, and the lonely man opened his heaped-up dispatches! The very last letter was one which brought him to his feet with a sudden exclamation. "Vera Orbeleff!"

He recognized the intuition which had caused the shooting star of Petersburg winter to send the document to his august sister.

As he read the four pages, his brow darkened and he dropped the letter upon the floor. "If it were not my birthplace,—if Khaminavatka did not hold our beloved dead,—I would sell it, and remove the whole family belongings to one of the other estates!" But, his words were vain, for, from his window he saw the family chapel! "Pierre, my mother, my father—lying there—no,—I will never leave the Mertvovod, I swear it!"

And, he sat down to marvel upon the tidings from the woman who was now one of the most powerful in Russia, the Egeria of the War Minister, a mighty functionary of vast wealth and boundless power. He read again her words.

"Vera Orbeleff is a beautiful witch," he mused. "Now, I understand why Lieutenant Ivan Radovich has sought out Wassili Federoff at Moscow to heal the breach caused by the duel! This is all her diplomacy!"

There were grave tidings, too, of the mad Radovich, Arcady, the fool of the whole countryside. The dashing

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court beauty warned him of the undying enmity and burning hatred of the declassè noble spendthrift.

"You have kept your pledge to me," she wrote, "and, I must bid you beware of this man! He is capable of anything. There is but one bright side to all the picture. You owe the ending of the feud between the two young duelists to Magda Radovich, who wrote her brother a letter which she showed to me.

"She will be a Maid of Honor next winter, and—she is an angel at heart! A gentle spirit of Love and Peace. That you might know her, your enemy's daughter, I send you her picture, which I obtained from her brother!

"And, now, for young Wassili's sake, let there be peace upon the Mertvovod! I shall see you there myself, when the roses come to your wonderful steppe!

"Till then, beware of Arcady Radovich—I will watch over you—and—guard you! The rest—depends on yourself alone! My last word—it is Magda who wrote to me to warn you of her half-crazed uncle's intended treachery—never ride the steppe alone!

"Of course, I know your fearless nature,—it is only to prevent another mystery that I send you the heartfelt words of your enemy's noble daughter!"

Serge Dumont siezed the forgotten packet, and, there, alone, in the halls of his proud old line, looked upon the face of his enemy's daughter. "The Day Star of the Dying Water!" he murmured. "I shall see that face some day,—I shall thank her for the words of white-winged peace."

And he softly repeated Prince Youresief's words, "It will not be always winter, Serge."

There were shuffling feet upon his threshold, and, with a sudden motion, the Lord of Khaminavatka hid the sweet-pictured face in his bosom.

Late that night, his valet heard his strong, resounding tread in the great state chamber, and, if a fair young girl had gazed out from her maiden chamber, that gloomy winter night across the Dying Water,—she could have seen the lights in the mullioned window, where the enemy of her race, gazed over the darkened stream, with her

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picture pressed upon his heart. It was a sudden passionate fancy which enthralled him!

"Where have I seen those eyes before?" Serge murmured, as he sought a brief rest, and then it all came back to him,—the eyes of the picture of the Forgotten Lady—the queen of the hidden bower whose existence was now known alone to him.

"The same—the same!"—he cried, and so, he fell asleep murmuring "It will not always be winter."

There came at last, the magic touch of Spring, and a brooding peace had reigned in these last two months along the Dying Water. Serge Dumont knew of the visit of the young duelist of the Preobajensky, and of his departure for Kief, for the watchful Boursakoff secretly dispatched a faithful boy daily to Bratskoe, only eight versts distant, his whole leisure being spent in a lynx-like watch of every movement of the cat-like Arcady Radovich.

In these months of comfort, Xenia, the Post Station drudge, had bloomed out again into the beauty of rounded womanhood, and, with her children around her, sat, softly singing at her sewing, the chief of the needlewomen of the chateau.

Loyal Boursakoff often led her aside to confer over the slightest movement of their hidden foes, but, all slept in peace, for ten armed Cossacks watched the chateau, and whenever the Lord of the Manor rode abroad to the now busy fields, there was a scattered platoon of the bravest horsemen in the world in sight of his every movement.

In far-away Petersburg, her passionate heart throbbing under her silks and laces, Vera Orbeleff watched keenly over the two rival young patricians.

She was happy at heart, for the great War Minister had added his injunction for a total cessation of all brawl between the two young stars of the rival regiments. "Let nothing unseemly occur—on your heads—young men! I never forget"—he growled. And, the youthful officers implicitly obeyed him.

The stormy-hearted Vera wondered at Serge Dumont's cold and stately words of thanks to her!

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"If he had only a heart—perhaps—there might be a way"—but, the summer queen misjudged the man who often rode the Mertvovod now with his eyes fixed on the distant gardens of the Radovichs, where the tender leaves of Spring were beginning to throw their veil of green over the blasted fields. She had cast the spell of another upon him unwittingly!

There were hundreds of peasants toiling now on both banks of the Dying Water—for April brought the reawakening of dormant nature. The snows had melted in a trice. The lean cattle, sheep and horses rejoiced in their release from the dark shambles and mouldy straw of the winter months.

The fresh young grass was shooting everywhere, and in the vast plantations of Khaminavatka the woods were growing fragrant. The voice of Spring whispered of the coming of the Summer Queen.

There was Spring in the heart of the young Master as he galloped from field to field, followed by the energetic Boursakoff seated in his single sulky. The happy days of Easter were approaching and the devoted Russian peasants yearned to see the end of their seven weeks of black fasting.

The faithful storks were all winging their way back from Egypt, by their own mysterious pilotage seeking their own chosen fields across the thousand miles of dreary land and fifteen hundred miles of pathless sea.

In the park and gardens of the chateau, a crowd of old men, boys, girls and women were singing at their work, while the lowing of the released cattle,—the bleating of sheep, and the neighing of horses was borne afar upon the thin, pure air.

A mysterious hum of hidden forces told of Nature's wondrous alchemy which can bring from the same acre of ground, in succeeding years by kindly magic, every blessing of fruitful earth. The undying creative spirit of the Earth was working its marvels beyond the mind of puny man—a thousand paradoxes in a single field!

There was a smile upon Serge Dumont's stern face, for in work, blessed work, he had at last found his panacea, and the shadows were lifted from his darkened

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heart as he listened to the singing voices of the Spring!

The days flitted busily away until Easter Eve brought the crowding faithful to the five-domed church of Bratskoe.

Loyal to his family traditions, the young Boyar rode over in the hush of the evening to join the devout orthodox in their hushed watch in the darkened church.

The peaceful calm of a reawakening Nature brought back to all the Mystery of a Risen Lord.

On the year before, Serge Dumont had watched in the darkened gloom of the vast Isaac's Church of Petersburg for the first lighted taper, the boom of the bells, the bursts of melody telling of the Risen Saviour.

Lord of a half-dozen manors, here, in the little green-roofed church, filled with dark-veiled women, and prayer-murmuring moujiks, among the lowly of the earth, he now reverently awaited the appearance of the village pope with his little train of acolytes. Serge Dumont had left his faithful guardian, the watchful Boursakoff. He was alone, for his escort of Cossacks had pressed forward in the dense crowd, each one bearing an unlighted taper to catch the first holy light at midnight.

The incoming crowd pressed the young noble into the corner of a little chapel, and his mind wandered far away from the simple worshipers.

His heart lingered around the chapel where his beloved dead lay at Khaminavatka, and, he suddenly remembered his duty to send a carriage for the rustic pope to come and bless the magnificent Easter table in the old mansion. "I can ride home with the Cossacks," he thought, "and, leave Boursakoff to conduct the Pope, in my carriage." He had forgotten his dormant enemies, the Radovich clan, until an imperious whispering voice near him recalled the presence of General Andrè Radovich, the haughty Imperial Aide de Camp.

"It is the truce of God! His House is large enough for all," mused the young noble as he edged his way through the throng to an altar on the other side of the humble temple near the door.

A faint twinkle, a mere spark of light,—burned there on a tiny taper! The gorgeous ceremony of the last

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year returned, for he could but faintly descry the graceful lines of a kneeling woman's form.

Here was no golden iconastos,—no priceless malachite pillars,—no icons blazing with jewels,—no lamps of solid gold,—no vast balustrade of solid silver,—no golden-framed holy doors, no magnificent holy table with priceless pyxis. It was a humble temple.

Princesses,—kneeling Duchesses,—here were none,—no groups of glittering Generals,—no court beauties in ball attire, hidden beneath the mourning robes.

"But, God is as near this peasant girl kneeling at my feet," he fondly thought, "as in the House Beautiful, where an Emperor kneels." The peace of the quiet hour,—the throbbing of the rugged hearts around him,—the hushed awe of a waiting world, stilled his proud heart.

He forgot all hatred, all enmity, and, there, before God's Holy Altars, he waited for Light, Life and Risen Love.

The bell clanged above him, the voice of song arose, and lights began to gleam out in the main church beyond the trapeza.

"Christos voskrés," rang out from all the village bells and the stately soldier bent his head to light his taper from the candle held out to him by the woman who had risen to her feet! The melting music thrilled all hearts.

"Christos voskrés," murmured a sweet, low, thrilling voice as at his side, and, then, the man who bore her picture on his heart, saw the beautiful face of his enemy's daughter—the Day Star of the Mertvovod!

They were alone in the secluded corner, and, with a sudden inspiration, he answered, "No istinê voskrés."

The words had gone out between them which made them, one in heart, for a brief happy moment,—the sacred salutation, "Christ is risen." "He is risen indeed."

It was the holy seal of a sudden love.

The beautiful, pleading eyes tempted him! It was already summer in his heart as he kissed her on each cheek in the devout salutation of the Orthodox!

Then, with a mad impulse, he pressed his lips to her

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own and murmured, "Beautiful darling! Angel of peace and love!"

Before he could recall himself, they stood beside each other in darkness, for the tapers had fallen from their trembling hands.

The little train of acolytes was already beginning to follow the bearded pope around the body of the church.

Torches flared out, tapers were twinkling all over the assemblage, and salutations and happy cries resounded on all sides.

A gentle hand stole into his own. "Leave me—you know the dangers," the trembling girl whispered. "They are all here on the other side of the church." His voice trembled with emotion as he murmured, "Swear to me that we shall meet again!"

"Go, I beg you," the girl cried, covering her face with her veil. "You shall hear from me, tomorrow, at your own home!"

"Angel one!" was Serge Dumont's despairing whisper as he caught her hand, and pressed it to his lips.

He drew off a little ring which was on his slender finger and dropped the seal ring of his fathers in her hand.

Then, darting out of the church door, he sought the Cossack horse holder. "Find Boursakoff"—he sharply cried. "I have orders for him!"

In ten minutes, the Master of Khaminavatka was madly galloping homeward. "It is the will of God," he cried, as he raced along.

There was a bird singing in his awakened heart now. And, the old Prince's words came back, "It is not always winter, Serge."

CHAPTER IV.

ON HOSTILE GROUND.

When the interior of the church was one golden glow, and the Pope, with his train, slowly passed around the whole circuit, kissing the sacred icons, and devoutly

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kneeling at the altars, the haggard eyes of Arcady Radovich sought in vain for his hereditary enemy.

He scanned the little group of the petite noblesse,—he fiercely wandered along from altar to altar, and noted the graceful form of his lovely niece as she made the tour of the sacred places. His own knee was never bent in homage, he had gone on beyond faith.

The peasants slowly parted to allow the detested young noble to pass, and they noted, with glee, that the few seigneurs who had ridden from forty to eighty versts each, artfully avoided giving Arcady Radovich the kiss of peace, obligatory on all good Russians for three days.

As for the haughty women of rank,—a corporal's guard of beauty,—by a pious fiction, they did not see him!

The debauchee's wasted form,—his mean, wolfish face, —narrow-eyed and low of forehead, repelled even callous strangers.

The faded uniform of an Infantry Captain decorated the stooped figure.

With instinctive horror, the fresh-faced peasant girls shrunk away from the wretch who had been for long years the terror of the unprotected girls in the neighboring villages.

Now, his "droits de Seigneur" were only a horrible memory, for the mighty Czar had at last given to them the ownership of their own bodies!

Here, in the stronghold of an Orthodox Church, its altars faced, with an awful defiance, the man who would pollute body and soul. For, here, God protected both body and soul!

After the sacred procession,—the disappointed oaurien soon joined the family group, who were cynically watching the Pope now moving down the lines of votive offerings ranged near the walls, and blessing the fruits, flowers and Easter food.

With holy awe the peasants saw the blessed holy water sprinkle the huge loaves of Kulitsche, each bearing its lighted taper,—the towering white cheese,—the plates of comfits,—colored eggs,—honey pots and dainties

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touched but once a year. It was their feast of the first fruits of the year!

General Andrè Radovich, in a new gray uniform, with the white St. George's cross,—was busied chivalrously complimenting his vivacious sister-in-law, who had now thrown off her shrouding black robe, and appeared a radiant vision in complete ball dress, for the secret edification of Colonel Milovitch, who had ridden from far Wosnecenk to be near the woman whom he secretly adored.

The other aristocrats were merrily departing now to their midnight feasts, and the shouts of droschky drivers and khibitka lads rose discordantly without.

Arcady turned to his leaden-eyed brother, the gloomy Baron Alexandre, who secretly suspected the reason of Madame la Baronne's unusual display of charms.

Bald, sullen and dejected in manner, the heavy-set Baron Alexandre for years had been fighting the losing fight of a southern proprietor, and, now paralyzed with the loss of his serfs, he cursed the generous Czar, even here in the house of God.

"Did you see Serge Dumont?" wearily demanded the Baron.

"No!" roughly replied Arcady. "He is not even orthodox—a French upstart—and,—a coward! He feared to face us all here together! He did not dare to come here tonight!"

"Pooh, Arcady! You babble," said the Baron. "Remember your own regimental record!

"You would never face this man, and,—you know it! Find Magda now, and, let us go."

The scorn of his brother's words awakened the sleeping devil in Arcady's heart. "I have sworn to follow him to the death—and,—I will!" he growled.

"Then, if you do face him— your own life will be the forfeit! I am tired of this old feud!" replied the Baron. "The General warns me that our interests at court will suffer if there is another 'accident' on the Mertvovod.

"So keep your tongue within your teeth. You bungled that business of Pierre." The two men fiercely eyed each other!

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"There will be no bungling the next time," swore Arcady, who was humbly dependent on the bounty of his elder brothers.

He strode over to where Magda Radovich lingered on her knees. "Enough of this mummery," he roughly said. "We are no praying moujiks! Your father wants to leave! Our supper is waiting for us now."

The pale-faced girl glided to her mother's side, in silence, and, then—her pale cheek flushed as she saw Colonel Milovitch, lingering rapturously over his Easter "kiss of peace" privileges.

When the heavy dragoon turned toward the young girl, with a vulpine smile,—she fled out of the church to where the eight police guarded the equipages of the aristocrats.

The carriage of the Lord of Khaminavatka was waiting there, with the honest-faced Boursakoff in charge.

"Your master?" she whispered timidly to Nicolas Nicolaivitch.

"Gone home, Barina," answered the Intendant. "I wait here to conduct the pope to-morrow at three to bless our Easter bread."

The graceful girl fled away with a newly born hope in her gentle bosom.

The town was ablaze with lights, the streets were full of merrymakers, and the clangor of the merry pealing bells was deafening. They sang a song of peace and joy!

The villa of General Andrè was glowing in a blaze of glory, and,—first in the family carriage,—she awaited in silence the party who were to make up the General's supper table.

"The pope comes to our house at eleven—and—goes over to Khaminavatka at three! He will be the safest messenger! But, he must suspect nothing!" she murmured, as she nestled in the carriage.

The village priest was to be a convive at the General's midnight board, and, as the Baron's mansion was but three versts from Bratskoe,—the hour of eleven would give him time to first complete his pastoral visit there, and at three, depart for the last of the three seigneurial houses in his parish.

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A pleasant fee of fifty roubles and a basket of champagne awaited him at each of the patrician homes. Easter was the humble priest's happy harvest time.

Magda was strangely silent during the ride to the villa! Girl as she was, she could not ignore the tender hand-clasping of the burly Colonel, with the gaudily dressed matron, who only feared of all things on earth,—her own daughter's clear, unflinching eyes. And, though knowing little of the world, the young girl instinctively despised the amatory Colonel.

In half an hour,—the merry company were at table! In the rambling villa of General Radovich there was that union of oriental display and western modern elegance which makes the high-class Russian country house a most romantic abode.

Seated at her uncle's side,—now appearing a Diana in plain white,—the young beauty's only ornament was the gold chain and cross which proclaimed her orthodox belief. Her debonnair Uncle Andrè saw the sudden bloom of the Rose of Life in her lovely face!

"You are bewitchingly beautiful, to-night, Magda," he kindly said. "Have you been to the river to pluck the golden Péroun's flower—the magic fern blossom, which gives you all the secrets and the treasures of the earth,—the blossom which opens its golden heart as the Easter bell rings."

The fair girl dropped her eyes in a sudden confusion, for the golden blossom of Love had opened in her lonely heart at that joyous peal. And, she feared for this priceless secret!

The feast in the villa was a merry one, and Magda spoke but little, until the belated pope arrived.

Then, her gentle dissimulation flattered the happy priest, for he knew not that fate had selected him to be the first messenger of a love bred between the deadly lines of an undying vendetta.

It was four o'clock when the family carriage of the Baron swept along through the streets of Bratskoe for the twenty-minute drive between the brothers' strongholds.

Something in Magda Radovich's heart told her of a

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suddenly opened gulf yawning between her and her mother.

For, the champagne-quickened Colonel leaned over the Baroness' hands, planting heated kisses there at parting, and the Day Star of the Mertvovod heard the parting whisper, "I will come over with the priest,—in the morning,—my golubtchik!" It was a rude awakening to the innocent girl—a sad enlightenment!

In the darkness, the tender-hearted girl faced her destiny. "I never could tell my mother—after this," she sorrowed. "Uncle Arcady is only a ruffian—and General Andrè a man of the world—a wild noble of the old time. Brother Ivan surely must not know,—there would be another duel—and—my poor father—he is hopeless and heartbroken."

Even an unsophisticated blossom of the Catherine Institute could not ignore the shrouding gloom of Baron Alexandre's daily life.

For, all men knew that the country noble occupied that uneviable position of the Doge of Venice who had a very handsome wife, inordinately fond of other men.

Magda's last possible refuge was the Princess Vera Orbeleff, who had showered benefits upon the lonely girl at the Catherine Institute, but, she shrank from unfolding, even to that Princess Charming, the secret of the magic flower now blooming in her virginal heart.

On the Princess Vera's visits to that palatial school across whose threshold no layman can tread save the Emperor,—Magda had too often seen General Andrè's glittering uniform in the carriage of the generous little passion flower.

"She would surely tell the General—my father would soon know—and—then Arcady and Brother Ivan would be as raging wolves."

Already proudly loyal to as suddenly conceived and as perilous a love as that of Romeo and Juliet, the lonely girl knew that she could trust the pope alone—for the village prelate would hear her confession,—and—then the awful seal, the unbroken seal of the Church would hold her disclosure sacred till death. Love strangely

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born had made her the champion of the lonely man now worshiping her silent picture.

With a throbbing heart and a sad sigh, the young Baroness silently parted with her mother, when they reached the mansion on the Dying Water.

Lili Radovich knew that her unsullied daughter instinctively despised Boris Milovitch, for the acute dragoon,—a past master in Love,—had whispered "Beware the young pigeon! She has eyes and ears—and,—her wings are now fully grown!"

The reckless rake recognized an enemy in the clear-eyed girl. With a listless "good-night," the mother left the girl, who sought her own nest, far up in that corner of the mansion, whence she gazed out alone, and saw the palace of the steppes gleaming with lights in every window.

She fell asleep, with a prayer on her pure young lips for the man who had come so strangely into her life. Her father's mortal foe!

Across the sedgy Mertvovod,—Serge Dumont was returning from seignorial visit to his own feasting village. He had watched the twinkling white light in Magda's window and wondered if her graceful shadow was thrown upon the walls of that room which her young beauty made a treasure house.

By his order, the old chateau held the whole household in its vast dining room on this Easter night under the austere guidance of old Chuchinka, jealous of her authority and wondrous to behold in her one silk dress, and her bunch of keys on the well-known silver chain.

When he entered his own apartments, Serge Dumont had made a visit to every well-remembered icon, where gleaming gold and silver veiled the tenderly smiling faces which had so often looked down upon his departed dead. A new saint had entered the calendar of his heart.

He knelt and swore to be true to the love which had so strangely become the one purpose of his life.

Without, the younger peasants of the village, gathered in the courtyard, were singing their plaintive carols as he entered the great dining room, and with his bejeweled hand, offered the wine to his wrinkled old nurse,—the

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aged Chuchinka, and all the elder servants who had watched him in youth bestride his first Cossack pony. He was "servus servorum" on this solemn feast!

There was, too—a waiting delegation,—the Starost,—the Elders, and the "White Heads"—all ready to conduct the Lord of the Manor over to the village, where every window now gleamed with festal light! The long seven weeks' fast was done, and in each humble cottage, the festal Easter supper was spread.

The hardy steppe toilers rejoiced in Easter, for was there not the June fast,—the long maceration of the flesh from November first to Christmas,—before these stolid believers who regularly fasted all other Wednesdays and Fridays of the year. A hard and dreary burden of faith!

But, the blessed summer time was now coming on, and the village lads and lasses of Khaminavatka all thronged the larger houses as the young Manor Lord gravely passed on to visit the houses of the principal men of the new Mir.

In every interior visited, was the same general household arrangement,—the doubled windows,—the hooded door porticos,—and the bright potted plants in the deep window recesses.

Divided into two or three rooms,—the principal one showed its corner shelf with the silver-framed icon, and its burning lamp,—the pictures of the new Czar and Czarina—for Nicholas the broken-hearted had given way to the great Alexander II.

A gigantic corner stove of whitewashed brick, above which, on a platform, urchins and the feeble were already sleeping, on the coveted "palati," filled a corner in each grand living room.

A wide board platform surrounded three sides of the rooms, piled high with gay pillows; and, on a huge, long table,—surrounded with stools,—the feast was everywhere spread.

Mountains of "piroghi," the favorite meat-stuffed pies —the Paschal lamb and fowls,—pork and platters of buckwheat kasha,—with bowls of "braga" beer,—bottles of vodki and flagons of oil abounded. Foaming quass,—cauldrons of bortsch,—cabbage soup, and the aristo-

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cratic cigarette, with piles of Tartar tobacco, made up the remainder of the provincial display.

The men of the households were all busied in exchanging Easter greetings with all new comers, and the sound of rustic music floated gaily out from the opened windows.

In every home, where triple families were united under the Khozain—the Family Administrator,—or the Bolshak—the "Big Fellow,"—the young noble exchanged friendly greetings with the household patriarch,—tasted the viands,—drank a drop of vodki,—and then left his offering of crisp roubles, welcome vodki or the coveted cigarettes.

It was impossible to leave the village without visiting the assemblies of the younger people, who now looked forward, with burning hearts, to May—the month of Love! For the Christening of the Cuckoos was over!

The belated sleeping ones of Palm Sunday had all been merrily flogged with palm leaves,—and, the voice of the nightingale calling to its beloved mate was feebly heard in the budding grass of Khaminavatka.

Accordion and violin were everywhere droning out the music of the dance, and the young lovers talked of the festival of St. George's Day,—the blessing of the cattle,—and, of the merry festivals of Lada—the goddess of Joy and Love and Spring.

The jovial songs of "Lada,—Lada,—didiz Lada" would soon ring out in the perfumed fields when the steppe had taken on its dreamy summer witchery and the young blood stirred in every heart. And, all their hearts thrilled to the pulses of the Spring!

The quaint old folk songs resounded where the singers watched the merry dancers,—in cosy cabins the story-tellers were busy with relating the traditional glories of the olden time,—and, Serge Dumont, having fulfilled his manorial visits, and left a generous largesse behind him everywhere—returned to the lonely steppe palace, where his household was still feasting. And, only a sweet, newborn hope consoled him—the thought of that girl with the tender, wistful eyes—who had striven to guard his life—even while a stranger.

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A sympathy with this strange, proud, conservative peasant folk stole into his heart! "They have many sorrows—and, few joys—save the brief time of early youth—the fleeting delights of the summer season of life and love—the one May month when the maiden's eyes are dreamy, and the heart of man is hot and restless.

He had gazed on the stern toil-marked faces of the brave, hardy peasants, who unflinchingly faced the privations and hardships which would appall all but a Russian heart. Rude—unlettered,—yet—loyal—devoted and true.

Even in their crimes, faithful to their ingrained religion,—the starving murderer of the lonely steppe throwing away the meat found in his victim's slender wallet, when Lent made it a mortal sin to break the fast, but—not to kill for lawful food. True to the letter of the ironclad creed!

The dancing sun of Easter morning sent its mystic rays early through Serge Dumont's windows, and, from sweet dreams of one who was now all in all to him, the master arose and wandered down into the garden,—threaded the budding orchard,—and passed on into the great park.

There were birds caroling even now,—the blackbirds were all busy in the rushes of the Dying Water,—and the great gray-winged crows which came into Russia with Napoleon's army flapped lazily away over the fields where the plows were now busied on these days when a stern orthodoxy did not add eighty saints' days and holidays, to the fifty-two restful Sundays of the year.

He turned and gazed back at the old chateau The servants were already swarming around it like bees, for old Chuchinka was dressing the Easter Table for the coming blessing of the village pope.

It was the pride of her simple heart that in all the broad Kherson, no such family display was made on this blessed Easter morn as that of the groaning tables soon to be set out in the great drawing room opening out upon the southern portico—for the crowning glory of Easter was to come, the blessing of the Food!

With a light step, the young master swung along

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through the great plantations, to where, standing on a grassy knoll, he could see the morning sunlight gleam on the windows of his enemy's mansion, beyond the purling Mertvovod!

The lean steppe seemed now to be glorified, for the sunlight was in his happy heart! He mused for an hour and then sadly turned away from the view of that distant home beyond the water which Love had made for him a garden of Paradise.

"There is no way—it is impossible!" he sighed. "I can not go to her—and,—she can not come to me."

Too well he knew the fierce resentment of her bold kinsmen, and—his own practiced eye told him there was no safe means of approach to the Radovich chateau.

The country was all open and bare,—the river flowed between—and—there were always hordes of Radovich's shepherds and Cossack horse trainers,—there were tribes of his ex-serfs, and bands of the wild, ferocious Ukraine dogs who knew the figure of every lawful visitor on the southern bank of the river. It would be a madness to venture over there!

He wandered back into the park, now beginning to put on its summer glories, and then, sat down on the steps of a little Italian summer house by the lake, where often he had seen his own graceful mother watching her merry children, in the balmy summer evenings.

The door was swinging open,—the pretty haunt was now deserted, and this cold neglect struck him to the heart. For, it was to him, hallowed ground!

He entered and then, climbing to the little platform above the roof of the chalet, cast his eyes once more toward his Mecca of Love.

With a sudden start,—he noted that a tongue of his own growing forests almost joined the straggling woods of the Radovich gardens,—at a bend of the Dying Water where a few knolls covered the narrowed stream. And, a mad idea seized upon him.

"I might get safely over there,—at night—there are peasant skiffs everywhere along the banks, but,—it is hostile ground! It would be utter madness—and—de-

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tection would only mean her broken heart—perhaps, the death of one of us!"

With a bowed head, he wandered back toward the chateau. Meeting the head gardener, a sudden impulse led him to order the instant repair of the pretty kiosk by the lake.

"Make two keys—one for you—one for me, and—put it in perfect order. I shall have some books there—some furniture—for the August days, when the open park will be my home."

A childish memory came back to him of a cave, once used by the old Tartars, hollowed in the soft limestone rock of the Dying Water.

"I have forgotten the cave, Dimitri," he said. "Take me to it!" It seemed as if he were a boy again in spirit, as he mused.

"It is all overgrown with trees and brambles, now, Barin!" answered the gardener, "but it has been enlarged, and, is in good order.

"The Barin Pierre, whose memory may God ever bless, used it as an icehouse, until we built our new icehouse on the hill! Let me lead you there."

The two men walked along the inner skirt of the park forest, until the substantial doors of the cave were seen.

"Here are the keys, Barin," said the gardener.

"Open it, and—leave it open. Give me the keys," absently said Serge. "I will come down and look at my old playground some day. The air is foul and must be cleared. You can burn some pans of sulphur in there."

The moody lover remained shut in his "cabinet de travail" until the hour of the dejeuner.

At his side, the exquisite old Russian silver coffee service remained untouched, for he was spellbound, gazing at a picture which called up to him the one woman in the whole world for him.

He had already revolved every plan of meeting the Day Star,—his gift of God,—the angel of peace and love! There were none of the neighboring nobles who now socially invited the moody Baron—the mutine and worldly mother!

In any formal ceremonies—there would be General

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Andrè,—the vindictive Arcady—or the sullen father at her side, even if Madame la Baronne were absent on the artfully arranged visitès where Colonel Milovitch appeared always as a deus ex machinà.

While he meditated—a courier galloped into the court with Easter offerings, greetings and letters from his stately sister and a bag of Petersburg letters.

"Barbe!" he thought. "She might aid me!" Alas! He too well knew the stern and haughty pride of that sorrowing woman's breast!

"Impossible to tell her! She would lay her life down to prevent such a marriage!" He left the letters unopened—for a wild project entered his mind! "If Magda is named a Maid of Honor,—I could rejoin my regiment! The Chevalier Garde are the Empress' own bodyguards. I would always meet her at the court.

"The Winter Palace has its thousand corners—and—with the favor of the Tzaritza—the Emperor's permission for our union, would crush down all opposition." It was a tempting, a fascinating possibility! And, yet, a hopeless idea!

For, he dared not face the abandonment of his duty as chief of his house. There is only Wassili Federoff—now," he sighed. "I owe a debt to Pierre—to my forefathers, to my poor people—to the others who look up to me. I can not abandon the Kherson, the home of my gallant kinsmen. Our love bears its own doom, in its innocent birth! For, we are both chained for life—on hostile ground."

He marveled at the impulsive accident of Magda Radovich's sudden self-consecration. In his ignorance of the unexplored recesses of that girlish heart,—he knew nothing of the social renown of his own gallantry and bravery at Petersburg.

It had been an honest tribute of her duelist brother to Serge Dumont's splendid character as an officer which had caused the romantic girl at sixteen to dream of the flower of her foemen's family. And, strange chances had unwittingly aided him!

Princess Vera Orbeleff had taken the young Catherine Institute Beauty to witness the superb entry of Alexan-

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der II. into the city on the Neva, where the heavy crown was placed upon the Czar's devoted head. And, Magda had seen him there!

Riding at the head of his battalion, in all the bravery of gleaming cuirass, silver helmet with its soaring double eagle,—and all the superb panoply of the Chevalier Garde,—the young Major, mounted on his splendid charger, seemed to her a newer Lohengrin, a very prince of princes.

And, the aristocratic beauties who thronged the Institute's halls were well dowered with brothers and cousins in the two superb bodyguard regiments.

Serge Dumont's chivalry in the field,—his tenderness to his soldiers,—his princely generosity,—all these stories had come home to her—and,—in the last months of the excitable election scheming,—the demise of Marquis Pierre,—and, the romantic duel of the two hot-headed youths,—the man who now ruled her bosom had been brought near to her in a thousand ways. And, Princess Vera had carelessly made the young hero seem a demi-god.

Moreover, even the fiery young brother had admitted to his gentle sister that, wine and an untoward remark alone had brought him face to face with Major Dumont's nephew!

The leading officers of the Preobajenskys and the Chevalier Garde had all labored to prevent the duel, in which the two young Lieutenants were merely the instruments of a savagely refined code of regimental military pride.

More than all, the gossiping Princess Vera Orbeleff had made her correspondence with the prospective Maid of Honor, only a chronicle of the manly self-abnegation of the new Lord of Khaminavatka.

The fiery-hearted court beauty had confided to her young protégée all the details of her own romantic visit to Serge—and his single-hearted pledge that hate should not loosen the red hand of vengeance upon the Mertvovod.

And,—so—ripe for Love's soft alarms, the bosom of the lonely romantic girl was all unarmed against the

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graceful enemy who had silently stolen into her heart. It was a trick of the strange witchery of truant Love.

Their meeting had found her the secret guardian and champion of the enemy of her house, and—their eyes had spoken with the electric flush of two lonely and loving natures; that holy kiss of peace—had brought them heart to heart.

The Master of Khaminavatka was soon summoned from his futile musings to inspect the glories of the Easter table, by the radiant Chuchinka, whose gathered household stood in respectful awe as Serge, with due ceremony, examined the whole magnificent display now awaiting the annual blessing of the village pope.

Already, hundreds of devout peasants had gathered along the south front,—the portico and esplanade being crowded with their own modest belongings, the first fruits of the dawning year.

Three great tables in the vast drawing room were all dressed with the matchless Russian embroidered linen, and groaned under a display of every product of the vast estate. The place of honor was given to a lamb dressed whole, — flanked by barons of beef, — hams, — varied fowls, and every class of game available.

Rare flowers,—ferns and palms from the great greenhouse, nestled among the sentinel rows of huge Easter cakes,—the hollow conelike kulitsche,—the pyramids of pashka curds,—the decorated Easter eggs, and all the homely wealth of the larder of the chateau. And, holy candles in forests, too, were there.

In the corners of the vast room, were four priceless icons, gleaming with gold, silver and rare Siberian jewels, copies of Russia's most sacred pictures,—the Virgin of Vladimir,—the Virgin of Jerusalem,—the Saviour in the Gold Chasuble,—and the Virgin of the Don.

Without, the peasant singers,—the village skaziteti,—and the wandering Kaleiki—were already chanting songs of the pious Olga, and the great Vladimir, who destroyed the famous idol Peroun, on that day when the heavens and earth trembled for joy, and the temple of the Pagan God became the Church of St. Basil, at holy Kief—the

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first Christian fane of Russia. It was an apotheosis of the sainted dead!

There were hundreds of humble little household offerings brought there to be blessed,—the beloved black rye loaves,—a fowl here and there,—plates of Easter eggs brilliant with color,—dishes of tshie,—and bowls of salted cucumber,—black radishes, and all the meager fare of the toiling peasant.

Groups of light-hearted young people listened to whispered legends of nixie and wood demon, the feared Lyeshy of the forest, while waiting the holy father. And, the spirit of Love hovered dangerously near all—on this festal morning.

It was three o'clock when the carriage dashed up and Serge Dumont at the threshold received the bearded pope, who, gravely bowing and blessing the house, then retired to the robing room, attended by the four acolytes who had followed in a second carriage.

And, then, gathered around the tables, the mustered household, each holding a lighted taper, stood in awe, while the deep-voiced priest solemnly officiated in the annual blessing. The peasants without were praying on their knees, for scores had crowded to the opened windows to participate in the solemn scene, and obtain the coveted blessing of the holy man!

When the last prayers were said,—the last person duly sprinkled, and the voices of solemn song had died away,—the Manor Lord escorted his reverend guest to the south portico, where, for an hour, the assembled faithful received the pope's blessing and saw, with heartfelt joy, the last little offering sprinkled with the holy water.

Stout Nicolas Boursakoff distributed his master's largesse, while, within, the joyous Easter breakfast was made ready by the now light-hearted household. The ban was lifted—and feasting was in order—in hut and hall.

Boursakoff's heart was troubled, for he dared not cross the dead line of caste to tell his master of the midnight meeting with the Day Star of the Dying Water.

"As God wills," he muttered, crossing himself. "There is a long life before them both! They will meet each

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other,—as the rivers run together," and, so, he held his peace. For, he only suspected some friendly, girlish warning of impending trouble!

But, within the chateau, while the now expectant pope was being disrobed by his acolytes, and his mind was firmly fixed upon the Easter offering so helpful to piece out his meagre salary,—Serge Dumont, in his own room, sat stunned with the wild delight of a sweet surprise.

He had watched the crawling clock hands, hopeful of some sign from the woman whose sweet face now filled his lonely heart. Alas—all in vain!

But, all the obstacles, the fearful risks, had occurred to him. "Their people are all known here, she would not dare to send a messenger—and,—whom could she dare to trust of our own?"

His heart had been hot and mutinous as he stood beside the pope and bowed his head in unavailing prayer. Blind—as lovers are!

For the control of his own heart had now left his breast, his very heartbeat sounded on the other side of the fatal river,—on hostile ground—where "the gift of God" lingered. "My whole life is hers"—he murmured —"and—here I will abide, and trust to the future—to see her sweet face once more."

When the priest had entered his robing room, without a word, he had placed a packet in Serge Dumont's hands. "For you,—Barin,—with God's Blessing!" he murmured as he disappeared.

Some prophetic instinct led the young noble to seek his own room, and, with trembling fingers, he opened the little packet. It was a mysterious gift—a nameless one!

There was unfolded to his eager eyes an antique silver Easter egg of old Moscow work—some quaint family heirloom of the olden time.

The clasp yielded quickly to his touch and then he read the letter which was enfolded therein, with eyes burning with a sudden light. The "Day Star" had found the pathway of Love!

The girl's simple words thrilled his very heart's core, as he read. He kissed a dozen times the letters traced

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by her trembling hand. It was a message of peace and love. And, the sunlight took on a brighter radiance!

For, she wrote, "I must see you! There is life and death in my message and, I dare not write it. I can not come to you! You might write to Princess Vera, but, I could not write to you in return. I have thought all night of every way,—and I dare not try to send you a letter by any one with my disclosure.

"If you did write to Princess Orbeleff—the letter might go astray. You know everything is opened by some one or another in Russia—and,—a sealed letter would be surely stolen. To approach me in public would be my ruin and, do you no good.

"There is but one way! To-morrow night, and every night,—till you come, I will be in the woods at the foot of our garden,—the point nearest the river, from eight to nine o'clock. It is dark then! We have our samovar at ten.

"If you will come tomorrow, then, put a light in the little corner tower of the chateau tonight. I can see it with my glasses.

"My window will be dark till I have seen your light burning—then I will light up the window. It is the highest one, on the corner nearest your chateau. The light will burn for ten minutes.

"Cross the river from the point of your woods, at the little knolls. You have only a few steps after you leave the river bank.

"Say nothing to the priest. He does not know of this letter! I can trust him this time, but—never again.

"MAGDA."

With an unmoved countenance, Serge Dumont met the Pope at the table, where the Intendant and the aged housekeeper alone represented the household.

The humble priest had achieved his last fatiguing official duty, and, busied in the discussion of unaccustomed luxuries—heartily applied himself to the wine glass.

He had seen with a secret glee, two baskets of the coveted French champagne strapped upon the boot of the traveling carriage, and only when he was out of the plantation grounds, under the escort of Boursakoff, did

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he dare to open the envelope which the noble had slipped into his hand.

"Five hundred roubles!" he muttered, aghast with a sudden joy. "My salary for a whole year." And then his head dropped in a happy slumber as he was driven back to where his patient wife awaited her lord and master.

The acolytes, trundling along in rear, were amazed at the possession of a twenty-rouble note each, and, there was great joy in the priest's humble domicile that night. For—Love had loosened Serge Dumont's habitually liberal hand.

The two villages of Khaminavatka were now in the wild ecstasies of the unrestrained Easter feasting, and, the merry household of the chateau were left in possession of the lower halls with a carte blanche for every pleasure. Serge Dumont was roving in a self-evolved Paradise—the key to which was a simple girl's frankly loving letter.

No one saw the master that afternoon, for, above them, on the roof,—seated in the little corner tower,—he was busied studying with his field glasses, the topography of the hostile ground.

He rode out for an hour before the flaming sunset of the steppe, and, the reins lay idle on the neck of his favorite Orloff, as he artfully threaded the river bank, screened by the knolls, and selected his point of crossing.

It was an easy task, for a little landing with a peasant's skiff indicated the ferry, above the three great pools where the imprisoned pike and carp were common to the dwellers on both banks of the Dying Water. "Yes, it is practicable!" he decided, his heart leaping up in a wild secret joy!

Tourko and the soldier valet were both astonished at the strange cheerfulness on their master's visage as he dined alone that night in solitary state, for he had fulfilled the last demand of orthodox etiquette and bovar custom, and was free to muse upon the letter which rested upon his heart. "The Easter sun has entered the Master's heart," sagely said Tourko, to his chum. The brave old sergeant crossed himself and cried, "It is an-

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other year now! There will be no more mourning—for, Easter drives away all sorrows!"

The annual illumination of the whole chateau enlivened the happy holiday, and—yet, none of the dependents dreamed that the golden light, set in the little tower by the Master himself, carried with it the birth of another era on the Dying Water.

Alone there, under the stars which seemed to sing, Serge Dumont gazed out over the boundary line, the narrow thread of the Dying Water.

With his own powerful field glasses, he had located the window, where the timid Day Star awaited his signal!

When the clear white light leaped out from that darkened window, the happiest lover on earth crossed himself, in a solemn oath.

"For good or ill—I come to you, my darling. The print of your foot makes holy that hostile ground. It was the stroke of Love on the silent Harp of Life!

The retainers of both houses, the village peasants, even the wandering wayfarer were reckless of all duty on the morrow, for the second day of the three days' feast found all cares cast aside.

And, so, there was no one wandering by the lonely stream in the soft blue dusk of Easter Monday, as Serge Dumont, simply clad in dark raiment, and all unarmed, loosed the little skiff, and with a few strokes of the paddle, leaped ashore on hostile ground. Fear seemed to him as a vanished shadow of the past!

Striding through a sedgy ravine, he reached the shelter of the straggling timber, and peered around him.

There was a white-robed figure gleaming there under the trees. In a wild rapture, he sprang to the girl's side.

Her head fell upon his bosom, and, for the first time, he felt the beloved's heart beating in ecstasy against his own!

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CHAPTER V.

STOLEN KISSES.

In a moment, the agitated girl struggled from her lover's arms, and quickly threw a dark mantle around her! Sheltered between the trees of the thickest clump, they were almost safe from observation.

"Oh! My God," Magda cried. "The time is so short and I have so much to say! You risk your life here,—there is a path often used to the little ferry and some one might straggle along. And, I will not have you come here again. They seek your life! I learned all to-day! Listen! It is to save your life that Love has made me bold!" She cowered to his bosom, as if fearful of the sudden appearance of her murderous kinsmen.

With his arms around her, the fearless noble listened to the story falling from her lips—a story of shame—the tale of the dishonor of a family.

The beautiful young patrician spoke alone of Arcady Radovich, but,—with his own secretly gained knowledge, Serge Dumont knew that others beside the drunken spendthrift must have been in the plot to entrap his dead brother in some mysterious way.

"I must be safely back within the mansion in fifteen minutes," fearfully said Magda, when her story was finished. "Ah! My God! There is so much to say, and,—I never can see you again, here!"

Serge caught her to his breast in an agonized rapture. "Life is not long enough,—the world is not wide enough,—to hold us now apart! I owe my life to you now!

"Mine is yours forever! Tell me—that you will be mine,—Magda,—that you will never marry another!"

"I swear it, Serge, by the Holy Virgin Mother," she whispered, but her voice rose to a faint scream, as a burly half-drunken peasant burst upon them, stumbling through the trees.

Dumont's arm was raised to strike him down, when with a sly leer the moujik reeled away toward the river.

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"Lovemaking—my golubtchiks!" he babbled. "Fools! There is but one thing in the world—vodki—vodki."

"Let him go," whispered Magda—"go in peace! He knows us not! My God, your boat! He will find it at the ferry!"

"Fear nothing, darling!" whispered Serge. "I hid it in the rushes—and, even if he finds it, I can swim the narrow stream, in a few moments! But—you—you, my angel! My God! How can we meet again.

"You must go in—now! It is the agony of death—this parting!"

For he had not yet seen in life the face of his darling save in the pictured silence of the gift of Vera Orbeleff. The darkness hid all but her shining eyes gemmed with tears.

"I must meet you. I must save you—but, how, how," moaned the girl, now a loving fearless woman! "I will take any risk! Let me think,—think!"

In a moment, she clasped her two hands.

"There is but one way,—one dreadful way! It must be done! Next week, my father, mother and Arcady go to Wosnescenk to the great Regimental Ball of Colonel Milovitch! I can plead illness. Trust to me! I will not go! Watch, then, for the light in my window!

"Answer it by lights in your summer house,—the kiosk down in the park. I can see them from my window, through the trees, and no one else can!

"Come down to the bank as soon as it is dark, when I answer your signal by darkening my room. I will cross over with you,—in the boat,—and, stay till midnight with you in the park. I can then tell you all. You can have a carriage—there, and robes. I can drive along the river bank with you—on your side! Then—safe from all harm, I can tell you all!

"There is no other way—Serge—to save your life—and—mine!"

While Serge Dumont's brain reeled with the daring self-abnegation of her plan, she drew his head down and whispered to him the last of her dread secret.

The young noble's heart bounded in a sudden wrath. "Wretches"—he cried—but, he caught her fondly to his

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breast, and, showering kisses upon her lips, her shining eyes and silken hair, he murmured, "Go, my heart's love! my queen! It shall be as you say!

"Listen, when I am safe back at home I will extinguish the light in the tower—and then—light it again, after a half an hour! Let your own room be dark,—and —when you see the sacred light, then light your window for ten minutes! We shall each know that all is well!"

And, crushing her in a last convulsive embrace, he resolutely sprang away from her side, leaving loving, burning lips that were clinging to his, in the agony of parting.

Like the wolf of the Ukraine, he stole back through the sedgy ravine, and a single bound brought him to his boat, then—with a few strokes of the oars, he plunged into the safe shelter of his own woods! He was on hostile ground no longer!

He raced along homewards, mad with a delirium of happiness,—until he sat down upon the steps of the little kiosk to rest for a moment! The sight of the scattered artificer's tools there gave him a practical idea, a new inspiration.

When he stole unobserved into the chateau, he sent for the Intendant.

"Boursakoff"—sternly said his master, "the weather is now becoming balmy. Take all the mechanics, and have the kiosk in the park completely refitted, in three days! Inspect the work yourself! I will send down my books and all the furniture that I need there. Let nothing prevent the work. I wish to sleep in the pure air of the gardens, in these opening spring days!"

When the Intendant departed, the excited lover hastened up the stairway to the deserted galleries and made his way to the corner tower, where the light of Love still steadily burned. Blessed signal to meet his darling's eyes!

In a moment, he had extinguished it, and, watch in hand, waited below in the gallery with his night glass trained upon the mansion where Colonel Milovitch was even then making merry with his accomplice and dupe, the mad Arcady Radovich.

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Strange, wild thoughts surged through the lover's brain, as in the darkness he revolved the disclosures of the beautiful Day Star. But, he could only watch that darkened window where he knew the impulsive girl was now watching for the second signal.

At last, the half hour slowly crawled away, the longest of his life. The golden gleam of light leaped across the murmuring Dying Water, and then—he dropped his head in an ecstasy of bliss, as the steady white light flamed back across the darkness which divided them. "She is safe—in her own retreat, thank God!" he cried.

For ten minutes, he gazed upon her answering signal, and then, he softly whispered, "Good night, my own darling!"

Slowly he descended the stair, passing first the empty story left to regulate the heat in summer and winter, and the vacant chambers of the two lower galleries where the fond lovers had found an earthly Paradise in the past!

"If she were only here—what an Elysium"—he murmured, for he saw, at once, the fatal situation of both. To leave Russia with her, meant the final ruin of his family—his own disgrace,—the downfall of the old line.

In his retired rank as Major of the Chevalier Garde and civil General, he could not marry without the Emperor's permission—and the powerful General Radovich —stood there,—a watchful lion in the path.

To approach Magda in open society meant ruin for both,—perhaps an affray with the brutal Arcady,—a duel with the fiery young brother,—or else a fatal rencontre with Baron Alexandre.

"Their blood shall never redden my hand," he vowed, "save in her defense!"

Once, safely closeted in his great state chamber, he then sat down to ponder over the strange disclosure which had forced the loving girl to cross the lines of her sex, and to meet him as frankly as a village girl steals to join her lover in the magical moonlight of the month of Love.

"We are trapped by Fate," he groaned. "Doomed to a lifelong sorrow—for I can not give her, either name, rank or protection. The Czar stands between us!" A

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stern look came upon his face as he gazed out at his foeman's house, where the burly Colonel reveled with the reckless Baroness. "They never would consent! They would send her away and wall her up in a convent!

"Let me go over this shameful story," he muttered. "Why do they seek my life? Why does Colonel Mjlovitch plot with this desperate fool Arcady?" He then sought counsel of Magda's sweet face in the picture, and, a sudden inspiration came to him!

He leaped to his feet, crying, "By God! I have it! The dragoon sees his way to Lili Radovich's side, if the bloody vendetta goes on!" It was a strange, strange story which the frightened girl had whispered to him, while clinging to his breast on those hostile shores.

"My poor innocent darling!" cried Serge, as he gazed at the girl's picture glowing there before him! "What should you know of man's villainy,—of woman's hidden vices!"

He recognized the astuteness which had placed the girl for twelve years in the Catherine Institute at far-away Petersburg, while the wary mother queened it, unsuspected, in the lonely valley of the Mertvovod.

General Andrè Radovich was always a winter absentee, and, often took a summer run over to the German spas or Paris.

Lili Radovich's sullen-hearted husband sought his own distractions at Kief,—Kharkov,—Odessa or Elizabethgrad, where the gay cercles de noblesse were all open to him.

Serge Dumont, with reddening cheeks, remembered how he had led the simple Boursakoff on to give his master all the varied gossip of the countryside. The common secret of the death of the wretch at the Post Station bound them closely together.

"You see—Barin," finished the Intendant—"Barin Alexandre himself is not a bad fellow at heart! He is doomed to have this reckless Arcady hang around his home—for the General will not keep the broken-down fellow at the Bratskoe villa.

"It costs nothing but a few cigarettes and a little vodki to keep Arcady hidden away here, on the Dying Water,

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and,—if he plays the rural tyrant,—it is only in their own village! This, and—the excuse that he has only to wait to see his horses grow is a pretext for the Barin's long absences.

"And—so—Arcady, sly wretch, keeps his wild sister-in-law's secrets, and is her go-between,—her letter carrier,—between Her Ladyship and the officers at Bobrinetz, Wosnecenk, Schmerinka and Odessa.

"It costs them nothing to travel, and—Arcady's invitation always covers the open shame. For, that woman Lili is a Catherine the Second—a man eater.

"But,"—he gravely finished—"since the black Colonel Milovitch has become first favorite—he mounts guard himself! And, Arcady is afraid of him. Milovitch is a deadly duelist, and—his regimental camp at Wosnescenk is the last decent circle open to Arcady. For, after all—fool as he is—he is a Barin—of high blood. Once a Captain—always a Captain!"

And, as he mused alone, this eventful night, on the girl's broken story, Serge Dumont began to gather up the missing links of the chain of infamy.

"It is easy to read between the lines. Baroness Lili would gladly have her daughter sent away to an honorable exile as Maid of Honor to the Tsaritza!

"Magda would then have her home in the Winter Palace—her carriage,—five thousand roubles a year for dress,—and, under the protection of her uncle,—an Imperial Aide de Camp,—and, by the favor of her royal mistress,—be soon married off brilliantly, on the Neva! Then, the mother would be easily rid of the budding beauty.

"So—that one accusing face would be absent! The projected contracts and business for her husband, gained by his powerful brother, would soon keep the Barin, more than ever, away from home.

"The son's rank in the Preobajenskys ties him closely to the Imperial pair—and,—with Arcady as her Leporello,—this female Don Juan can exploit her black-browed Colonel Milovitch, at leisure, and so live in luxury, a robust Messalina, here, on the star-vaulted steppe. Yes! That is the whole game—to cover this infamous intrigue!"

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The interrupted story of the frightened girl told him of a dark oath of vengeance already sworn by Arcady Radovich against the new Lord of Khaminavatka.

In wordy quarrels with his brother, the outcast had cried out in helpless rage, "You and Andrè are both rich—you have your own homes! I may be chased out of here any day. I fear to see the police ride up, at any time. And, I know, too, that both of you will be glad to be rid of me!

"I have no place to go,—no solid rank,—no money,—and,—I will not let this Frenchman hunt me down like a wolf! If he is once out of the way—then—there is no one left, but the old woman,—and—that boy Federoff at Petersburg. They would get all the property—and—perhaps thank me—in their hearts. The—heir is usually resigned to the blow of bereavement!"

Magda, nestling in her lover's arms, had told him of her father's angry rejoinder—"Let me hear nothing of it! I care not for your quarrels! Neither Andrè nor I will save you if you play the fool!

"Lili can keep you here as long as you are useful to her—but—remember—keep me out of your deviltry. I never wish to hear the accursed name of the Dumonts again. You stand or fall alone,—and—now—you know it!"

"Then, Milovitch and myself will stand together. We have a well-laid plan!"

"That's your own business," cried the Baron, as he stalked away.

It was after the interruption of the drunken peasant that Magda had gasped her last warning disclosures.

"I could not bear to see murder plotted under my very eyes, Serge. I had sworn to Vera Orbeleff to warn her, if there was a vendetta congress at any time in our home!

"But—there was no time! It takes three weeks to write, and so, I watched for you in the church.

"I stole away and hid by the door. I knew your figure at once, as I had seen you—that day—with Prince Youresief."

When her lover had released her from a crushing em-

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brace, she whispered hurriedly, "I am only a helpless girl—but—I can watch. To-day—after the breakfast—Colonel Milovitch and Arcady went into the little smoking room to play cards, drink and smoke, while my father and mother drove into Bratskoe.

"I overheard the two villains—plotting. Listen. There will be an invitation soon sent to you for the Regimental Ball—at Wosnescenk. Arcady says you stole some man away, and are hiding him, there, in your chateau as a dangerous witness! They wish to pick a quarrel with you at the ball, and then, kill you.

"I was hidden in my maid's sewing room next to them, and easily could hear all! Milovitch says, that you have no near friend or skillful second down there.

"He wants Arcady to force you to a quarrel, he will strike you—you naturally would challenge him—they name pistols at three yards—and—oh, my God—they plotted that there would be no ball in your pistol—and,—you would, of course, be killed at the first fire.

"And, then Arcady said, 'Of course I would have to clear out—and—this young devil Federoff from Petersburg would perhaps come down here and easily kill my brother Alexandre—for—there never has been any bitter quarrel between the General and the Dumonts.

" 'They are not neighbors! Of course—the boy would not dare to challenge a General Aide de Camp to the Czar!'

" 'The Baron must look out for himself—Arcady,' answered Milovitch, with a horrible laugh. 'He has been as deep in this thing as yourself. You and I are playing the same game in life—each for himself!'

"And so,—and so,—Serge"—the frightened girl had sobbed, "I have risked all to save you!—your innocent life! I had no one to trust—and—you must know what a woman's heart is now! For, I will not live here with murder in the air. It must be stopped forever."

She had been pleading with him to go away, and leave the Kherson steppe until drink or some revengeful knife should end Arcady's worthless life.

"Trust to me in all things, my poor darling"—Serge

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answered—"I can never leave the steppe as a coward! I will not leave it, unless you go to Petersburg.

"Let me quietly think all over! I will accept the invitation to the Ball—and—send a courier off with an affirmative answer. I will not be there—however—and so—no quarrel can be fastened upon me!

"As for Colonel Milovitch, I shall avoid him. If he seeks me out, I will name Prince Youresief as my second, —and—then—tell him all this treachery, withholding all names!

"One-half hour's interview of the old Marechale de Noblesse with that brute Milovitch, and the Colonel will soon know that he would lose his commission as a detected plotter of murder.

"As for Arcady,—I will never lift a hand against him in quarrel—Youresief could easily frighten him into leaving the country.

"I would have the Prince furnish him money on my account to live upon—and—so, these sly plots will fall!

"But, you—when they are all gone—and—expecting me there, you can come over to me, darling! I will have the roads watched—and—we can make our plan—for—at the last—I would have the good old Prince Youresief go to the Emperor, tell him all, get a permission to marry—and I would then—take you away to the summer of an endless love. I am rich and—we will go far away—until the hand of murder is chilled and powerless in death!

"Between your father, the General, and myself, there shall be no bloodshed! I swear it!"

In the silent vigil of the night, there came suddenly to Serge—the reason of Milovitch's crafty plans. "He well knows the Dumont blood,—Arcady once a fugitive forever,—if Wassili Federoff killed his paramour's husband,—then the Colonel would soon be his successor—the woman who rules him, her property and the General's friendship would be the bribe! Yes—that's the dog's plan!"

It was easy to see that the ardent and inexperienced girl was ignorant of the mystery of the death of Pierre Dumont, the tragedy at the Post Station—and dreamed

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not of the dark bond between her reckless mother and the wild Colonel of Dragoons—gambler,—libertine, and, —fire eater.

The easy familiarity of Russian country life, and Baron Alexandre's pusillanimous complaisance was a complete cover to an intrigue which even the village babblers in Bratskoe recognized. For, Magda only feared her mother's neglect and egotistic pleasure hunting.

Shut off from all human confidence, by the self devotion of his burning love, Serge Dumont vainly tried to find a plan to make the Day Star of the Dying Water openly and legally his own.

"I must wait—one single word—a careless glance of tenderness—and,—we would be parted forever! Only at the last—only to save her honor—or my life—dare I confide, even in Youresief, the gallant old hero—as for my sister—Barbe—or Wassili—impossible!"

When the longdrawn night was over, the young noble leaped from his bed at dawn. His first charge was to visit the chalet—in the budding park.

Already—the intendant was there—urging on the artificers in the completion of the only refuge where Serge could escape from the prying eyes of his crowding domestics.

With a bounding heart, the lover sought the pinnacle, and gazed over at the house across the murmuring stream where his darling waited for him. He could easily descry the windows which hid his darling one.

"Nothing shall part us but death, my own darling," he cried, "God has given you to me—mine alone—by the grace of His mercy." With a feverish haste, he returned to the chateau, and, then, after his morning repast, called up both Tourko and Sergeant Michael Michaelovitch.

He was soon busied in indicating the books, furniture and personal articles to be removed to the summer house by the lake, when two couriers dashed into the courtyard.

Seated in his library, he read with a burning rage, the Judas proffer of Colonel Michael Milovitch, in the florid courtesy of the treacherous invitation to the Annual Reg-

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imental Ball—the work of the precious pair who were joint heirs of Iscariot.

Five minutes later, the bearer of the missive rode back wondering at the present which dazzled him by its liberality.

"I will send Sergeant Michael, in due form, to-morrow, down to Wosnescenk with a cordial acceptance," mused Serge. "It will lull these plotting rascals into security for—the whole Radovich family must be hoodwinked—if I am to meet my darling—for one happy evening." A grave trouble awaited him.

The letter which the second courier had borne across the hundred and fifty versts from Elizabethgrad, told him of Lieutenant Wassili Federoff's arrival at home, upon an Easter furlough—and of the impending visit of the grateful youngster. Here was an embarrassment. It would prevent any stolen meetings on the Dying Water.

And, then, Serge Dumont felt at heart how love can fill the honest heart with stratagems.

His reluctant fingers crawled slowly over the paper as he prepared letters to both his sister and the happy young pardoned duelist.

The accidental presence of a superb present of Outchinikoff silver, designed for Madame Federoff as an Easter offering, enabled him to dispatch Tourko in a swift carriage, with the fatigued messenger, to prevent the untoward arrival of the youthful officer of his old regiment. For the presence of his gallant nephew would balk every plan in the week of the lucky absence of the Radoviches.

Blushes burned upon Serge's face as he saw his messenger drive away, the Cossack's riderless horse trotting freely after the road wagon.

The varied reasons which prevented the visit of his nephew were piled up like Pelion upon Ossa, and brought a mild amazement into the minds of his hoodwinked relatives three days later.

But the Easter offering and the promise of an early personal visit to Elizabethgrad, with a substantial increase of allowance to the young gallant, quieted both

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mother and son. "It would be my ruin to have him here now," was the lover's inward apology.

Before the fondly contrived deception had worked its charm,—the Lord of the Manor was installed in the completed summer house and had also inspected certain private arrangements concerning the old Tartar cave in which he had recalled many a boyish enterprise of frolic mischief as he explored its venerable galleries. And, now, he only awaited the departure of his foes.

With the restless stride of the wolf, Serge Dumont threaded his garden walks, and, in the leafy paths of the vast park, awaited the departure of the Radovich family for Wosnescenk.

With due military exactitude, Sergeant Michael had acquitted himself of his formal delivery of the acceptance of the conspirator's invitation to the Ball of the Dragoons,—and so the duel plot seemed to work like a charm.

With a secret glee, the happy lover learned of the early arrival at the military station of the Colonel and that reckless young noble Arcady Radovich.

It was high time, for, as Wosnescenk was the head of navigation upon the river Bug, already a pleasure steamer from Odessa and Nicolauff had arrived freighted with gay cavaliers and witching beauties to join in the week's festivities of the regimental games, the dinners and merrymakings and the crowning glory of the Annual Ball.

Serge now found himself easily becoming an adept in all the dissimulations of the scheming lover. It was easy to send Boursakoff into Bratskoe in charge of Xenia, the loyal hearted peasant woman to whom he had given a secret commission to discover whether the household of his enemy had yet departed for the merrymaking at Wosnescenk.

The Lord of the Manor confided to the keen-eyed peasant woman his anxiety to find out all about the movements of her dangerous husband, and to know if he was lurking in the train of the Radoviches.

"Have no fear," he cheerily said, "Boursakoff will stay with you and protect you! While they are away, you

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can find out the whole town gossip of Bratskoe." A boy, well mounted, was sent into the party to bring back news of the departure of Baron Alexandre and the composition of his party.

And, so it fell out, that long before sunset, on the evening of the hegira of Baroness Lili and her train, that Serge Dumont, seated on the steps of his summer house by the lake, knew that only the young Baroness Magda lingered on the other side of the watery dividing line.

He longed for the flash of that signal light, and his heart leaped up in a wild bliss—"I shall hold her again to my heart to-night!"

Fretting there, hour by hour, the proud hearted noble revolved all his recent experiences of the wild, lonely, social death in life of the Russian patrician of the steppe!

He had suddenly forgotten the boasted panacea of Work—blessed Work, for the wearing monotony of the morbid life! A new sovereign remedy burned in his veins, the fiery philter of Love—that Love for which men lay down their lives,—the love which will not be denied. Love the king of all hearts, all times, all seasons!

"I was mad to come here to this peopled solitude,—to dream that I could live without the companionship of my kind," he mused, "for here man and woman only lead the life of the contented beast—or else,—struggle against woe, want and hunger in the garb of monjik and village maid."

All the glittering allurements of the court,—the splendors of the vast city, half Paris—half prison, on the Neva returned to his mind. He sighed, in an expectant happiness.

"There, in all that luxury, I walked alone,—heart-whole—and—here in this waste, Love has found me out to light my darkened heart, with his unextinguishable torch! If I had my compeers with me here, then—to meet the Day Star in secret, were doubly impossible—and—so,—now, blindly wandering, I have found the way of life—led on by Fate—the guidance of the high gods! I will tread the path to the end—for her own dear sake!"

Dreaming fondly of a future lit up by Magda's eyes,

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he watched the dying sunset burn out on the meadows, and the soft darkness wrap the woods where the nightingale's throbbing heart gave forth the song of Love.

He had commanded his horses and the phæton to wait at the summer house, and, with a jealous mockery of enjoyment, he trifled with his dinner, until, armed in secret, he strode down through the gardens and orchards and lighted up the interior of his chalet. His heart ticked off every crawling moment!

With jealous care, he had filled the carriage with robes and ample shubas to disguise his lovely visitor. Standing where the fretting horses neighed below him, he saw across the dividing distance, the lamps of love shine out in the Day Star's windows,—and—then all was dark! She was now awaiting him, and his soul was illuminated with a fierce joy.

Dismissing his attendant, he drove steadily down along the bank of the purling stream, to where, a few hundred yards from the knolls, a deserted sheep enclosure gave shelter to his steeds. It was a lonely and deserted line of sheds and pens. Here he dismounted and hid away his horses in the dark interior of the largest sheep fold.

The night was still and warm and calm, as he leaped down the gravelly bank and ferried the little skiff across the Dying Waters.

And, there, at the point of the fringing forest, a loving goddess waited, with warm clinging arms to fold him to a loving breast. "They are all gone—it is safe!" she whispered, as they stole down to the murmuring stream.

There was no word spoken as the little skiff which went over to the hostile ground with one, returned with two, whose whole lives were sealed forever by the brief voyage across the rippling stream. It was the death of hatred and vice on the Dying Water! God's own peace and love!

In five minutes, muffled beyond all recognition, Magda Radovich nestled to her brave lover's side as the steeds, blacker than the night, moved slowly along under the fringing arches of the great plantation. They were perfectly safe, for no one would dare to halt the Lord of the Manor. The white stars gleamed down upon them,

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as they poured out in burning words the inexpressible tenderness of first love.

Out on the steppe, the cool night breeze sang to them its lullaby, as Serge, covering her little hands with kisses, told her of the mad plan which had haunted his midnight dreams.

An hour later, sobbing with delight, the happy girl hid in the friendly shade of the trees by the lake, while her lover tethered the horses deep down in a dell of the park! And—then, her light foot stole over the threshold of the summer house by the lake, her lover at her side.

With prophetic care he had doubly closed all the windows of the little temple of Love, and as Magda gazed around upon the miniature Trianon, Serge whispered:

"This is yours, my heart, my life, my soul to eternity —and"—he cried, clasping her to his heart, for she had thrown off her heavy wraps—"You shall reign to the end of our days here,—the White Lady of Khaminavatka!" He drew her eagerly to the farthermost room, doubly darkened with impregnable shutters of solid wood. "Here we are safe—" he cried—as he showed her all the fastenings.

In an inner boudoir, where a silver Circassian lamp hung, Serge Dumont gazed for the first time, in rapture, at the living loveliness before him, for there was no fear to part them now, and—lovingly he lingered in drinking in the witching charm of her pure unabashed loveliness.

It was the time of the first roses of life—the hour of stolen kisses sweeter than dreams of Heaven, dearer than all the bright promise which hopeful youth had ever painted. And, so, they made themselves a Paradise on earth!

Even in the delirium of his happiness, Serge Dumont was touched to the heart by the loving girl's childlike trust in his honor. He led Magda to a corner of the room where beside a sacred icon, the picture of his dead mother glowed still in all the loveliness of the dead past, the flush of her bright unwasted youth.

"Give me your hand, darling!" he whispered, as he slipped a worn circlet of gold upon her slender finger.

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His arm was around her, as he pleaded, "Repeat now after me. 'Nothing but death shall part us!'"

In a sweet low voice, her head upon his breast, Magda murmured, "Nothing but death shall part us." It was the wedding of their souls.

It seemed as if the lips of the last Lady of Khaminavatka smiled down also, upon them, from the frame where Pierre's girl wife still looked out from the cheating canvas, upon the little miniature Trianon where she had queened it by the Dying Water. Lovely as the departed queen was, the fair head bowed to receive the crown, was fairer still.

The frank eyed girl who stood below the two pictures was worthy to be the third of a trio of queens of the Kherson. Magda Radovich was the heiress of all the nameless graces of the Danube women,—by the haughty blood of her proud father.

And, the mobile charm of the Russian was the unconscious dower of her fiery hearted mother.

They were a noble pair of lovers, Serge, in the bloom of early manhood at twenty-eight, his keen manly face made resolute by gazing into the red flashes of the enemy's guns.

And, the young Hebe clinging to his arm was glowing in the unfolding flower of life at eighteen.

Her willowy figure of exquisite symmetry showed the legacy of old Grecian graces still hallowing the Euxine, the gifts of goddesses long forgotten under the waving grasses of the steppe.

Her pleading dark eyes and wavy rippling hair, brown with golden glints in the light—her rosebud lips, a very chalice of Love—and broad unshadowed brow, gave the contrasted charm of unbroken calm and rosy temptation to her thrillingly earnest face. Serene, sweet, and tender —a woman of infinite charm and a winning femininity.

In the seductive ease of the Russian patrician, with the underglow of her Danubian ancestry, the unswept harp of her life murmured to every fond touch of her lover's trembling hand. Her tender eyes were fixed upon her endangered lover.

"You must tell me all now—beloved Day Star," mur-

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mured her lover. "There must be a way to bring our lives together. Love shall find a way."

In vain, Serge sought to gain the heart story of the glowing girl whose heart had awakened so strangely to Love, in making herself the secret guardian of her father's deadly enemy—a man who lay under the ban of a wild Kherson vendetta. A love that stretched out the olive of peace across the bitter past to bless and to preserve—a reflect of God's own healing mercy.

"Only you—Serge—let us talk of you,—of your safety," cried Magda, clinging closely to him. "For, they will know, that in some strange way, you have discovered their plot! Your absence from the Ball will be construed as an insult. They will make it a pretext of a future quarrel!"

"Not so! darling," smilingly replied Serge. "I have already sent a courier, on the gallop, to Bobrinetz to have Prince Youresief send me his private physician.

"For your sake, I have quickly learned to dissemble! I shall send my old Sergeant then, down to Wosnescenk, with a courteous letter of regret for my sudden illness, and he will have my orders to wait and rest, and then to come home, riding post, when your family party starts out on its return.

"They must surely come through Bratskoe, and I have a faithful woman watching there who, also, will instantly send me a boy over on the gallop to warn me if any of your family return from the festivities. So, by a mere subterfuge, I will disarm them! While they are away, we can surely meet here every evening! I will lodge the physician in the chateau, and, then steal down here to you. I will come over to the forest to meet you every night."

"Not so, Serge," firmly answered the fearless girl. "Listen! I have absolutely no one now there to watch me! I have a gala peasant girl's dress, mantle, veil and all. I have my own little boat in the fishing pool below the three knolls. So,—I can land in your woods,—the foliage gets thicker every day,—and steal up to the old sheep fold, where you hid your horses to-night.

"There, you can easily meet me—we are both perfectly

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safe on your side of the river, and—we can then walk down here, through the park, in five minutes! No one would ever dare to dream that I have crossed the river! The evenings are becoming more balmy daily—and,—even if I should be seen in my boat on the Dying Water, no one would wonder! I am left to be mistress of myself!

"But, you—you, my own one,—a single glimpse of your form on our side, and, then,—I would be sent away. God knows where—perhaps—shut up in a nunnery or sent away to the Danube to some of our wild Serbian cousins.

"They are a rude and haughty race and it would be death to follow me there! And—so—as you can not come to me—I must come to you!" she cried, a lovelight in her shining eyes.

"My own brave darling!" cried Serge, as he clasped her to his heart, "It shall be as you will—until we are made one!"

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BOOK II.—THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE

CHAPTER VI.

XENIA'S PLAN.

They had talked in low caressing tones for an hour when the sudden sound of voices in the garden alarmed the rapt lovers. Magda turned pale and then, with a sigh, fell fainting into her lover's arms.

It was ten minutes before his vigorous chafing of the slender hands on which he showered frantic kisses, the cordial which he forced between her pale lips, brought back to consciousness the loving girl who was risking honor and life in his defence.

Serge Dumont's breast was racked with an agony of helplessness! Too late he saw the utter folly of dreaming that he could hold out a protecting arm over her.

As he gazed upon the pale and lovely face lying there before him, his heart was filled with an infinite tenderness.

"My bright, brave darling," he murmured, as he knelt at her feet. It was maddening to think that a single gossip peasant,—or the first untoward happening, would doom them to separation,—and—perhaps, blacken, forever the fair name of the angel of peace and love. A fearful price to pay!

In the opening season of the May month of love and passion's delirium Serge well knew that the gardens, orchards, park and plantation would be soon haunted at night by the straying couples who stole away, regardless of all risk or consequence, to murmur their vows under the spreading trees so dear to the Kherson lovers. A hallowed and time honored custom, in this land without other shady nooks.

"There is no one to aid," he groaned, "for, the con-

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fidant soon betrays,—the fool always babbles and, cowardlike, I must doom her to every risk for my sake! God help me, I can do nothing—nothing!" It was a case of absolute powerlessness! And, in the anguish of his heart, he swore to deny himself the bliss of gazing upon her beloved face, until he could find some way to shield the bewitching Day Star from harm.

From her innocent recitals, he saw that the girl merely resented her mother's neglect of the sullen husband, and, as yet,—her life was not darkened by suspicions of the real relations of the Baroness with the crafty Milovitch.

The long years spent at the Catherine Institute had shielded the girl from any knowledge of the varied love episodes of this country—Catherine II.—and the grim game of deceit and vice had been played in her absence.

The young beauty's simple faith was self evident, for she had answered all his questions as to the sojourn of the family party at the Regimental festivities, with the remark, "Colonel Milovitch insisted that Maman should remain during the entire week, and,—so we are safe as yet,—for he will surely escort the party home!

"There is no chance of any awkward surprise—only —only we must watch Arcady, who is as sly as a fox.

"He might be sent back to spy on you—and so,—detect my absence. But, as I detest him, and seldom speak to him, he would not dare to demand an explanation of me."

The young noble writhed in helpless anguish! "Hopeless, hopeless! All is dark! The General wishes to use this brilliant girl to advance his position at the court.

"Her mother wishes to get her out of the way of her own amourettes,—the father, disheartened and sullen, will be only too glad to have the crown take up all the expenses of this lovely child, in the brilliant shabbiness of a Maid of Honor's place!

"Arcady and the young brother would leap to arms—in case of detection, and my blood would be on their hands—or, theirs on mine—and,—Wassili—he would follow the feud—should I fall! My God! It is horrible—

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horrible!" Neither his loyal heart nor ready hand could now avail aught to shield Magda!

His bitter tears falling on the hands of his beloved awakened the suffering girl again to the cares and sorrows which crowd the path of true love!

In a few words, he calmed her fears, and, kneeling before her, told her of the perfect protection of the chalet.

"No one ever enters here. I will guard you with my life! And—" he added, with a sudden impulse, "I have a retreat which no one would ever dream of—in case of any sudden happening! The doors are all locked here! I alone have the keys."

Wrapping a mantle around her, he led her, by a rear door, out through the dense foliage fringing the little cliff overshadowing the park to where the door of the cave yielded to his skilful handling of a key.

Swinging the door, he led the astonished girl within! When the door was secured by inner bolts, Serge Dumont flashed a dark lantern around the old Tartar retreat!

"Here you are safe—in any case—until I could escort you across the stream! I have had this old hiding place arranged to store away our family papers and archives so as to escape the danger of fire in the chateau.

"There is an inside lock as well as the outside lock; you shall have the keys to both, and, you could be put across the Dying Water at any time, in a few moments. This is safety! I will have the interior made comfortable, and there will also be lights, food, and water here, in case of any sudden betrayal."

In a few moments they returned to the chalet, where Serge unfolded all the fond outpourings of an affection now fanned into a glowing furnace.

"I see it all now, my poor darling! We must meet no more—at the risk of your honor,—your liberty—and—perhaps, my life! If we only had a confidant—one faithful friend—but—there is no one to trust here.

"Princess Vera is under the wily General's influence—and,—Prince Youresief could only go to the Czar, at the very last, and beg on his knees for a consent to our marriage."

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"Serge—my beloved!" cried the girl, fixing her star-like eyes sadly on him, "I must meet you—I must be near you—always to guard you—to watch over you—to save your life. We must find a confidant. I dare trust no one!

"Our home is a sad one," she faltered. "You must have some one who is true to the death! I see the dark shadows closing down on us!

"And—I swear to you—that if discovered I will kill myself rather than be led away to a forced marriage—or a living death! My family will never consent to our marriage. I know my mother's implacable hatred of all your race!

"Why I know not,—but,—she is pitiless. My father and the General are human beings, and they are reasonable!

"But, Arcady Radovich would lash my dear headlong brother Ivan on to madness with tales of his sister's dishonor. I, then, see nothing but, open graves!"

The loving girl buried her face in her hands and broke into a storm of tears. The shadows were falling over the strangely born love, nursed in fear and secrecy!

"Let me take you away, Magda!" cried Serge, his heart swept by a wild storm of passion. "God has given us to each other! I would die if we were parted by Fate! Once abroad,—and—married,—you could defy the hereditary hatred of your family! I would guard you with my life!" He spoke, dreaming of the myrtled shores of Sorrento and Amalfi—the lover's heaven on earth!

"Serge, my own!" cried the girl. "Think of the ruin of your whole family. We could not even get passports to leave! If we tried to we would soon be betrayed and —blood would flow! You shall not be the sacrifice to my poor charms! Your widowed sister, Madame Federoff, would be disgraced—her only boy would be hunted down—for, your estates would all be forfeited, and—, he would be left to face the vengeance of four merciless men, alone! No! No! We must wait! Flight is impossible,—marriage is equally impossible, until God

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helps us—and—yet, my God,—Serge, I can not give you up!"

She fell sobbing in his arms, and her head drooped like a lily upon his throbbing breast. "No! Darling," she murmured, "I must take the risk—and—you must let me watch over you—until Arcady Radovich is no longer here—a plotting human fiend. Once that he were gone, my mother has no one to nurse her vengeance,—and,—to do her bidding! You must find the confidant—for, we must have some one to help us—some true heart, however humble!" The poor girl's eyes were dimmed with hopeless tears.

"If Vera Orbeleff were only here, she would help us. She is free as the air. She is coming down in three months with the General, and—it is she who is naming me for Maid of Honor. She could move the General's heart, if we were to meet her together! He is like wax in her hands—and—I think that she might aid us!

"For, Serge, she loved your brother Pierre, and for years she has told me all about you. Pierre had saved her once from an utter ruin, and—if he had asked her,—she would have been the happiest woman in Russia, as his wife—to have been a very slave of Love!" Here was the secret of the gay butterfly's reckless life—her little heart story!

Serge Dumont started in surprise! At last the past was made clear. He saw now, in an instant, the firm white womanly hand which had reached out in the darkness to strike at the life of the noble hearted Pierre Dumont—faithful to the memory of the dear dead woman whose picture smiled down upon them.

For, in his brother's escritoire he had found a secret drawer, wherein lay two or three faded letters! There was no signature, but the outpouring of a reckless woman's love had been followed by a letter breathing all the curses of a scorned one.

It was Prince Youresief who had told him of the ball at Kharkov where Pierre Dumont had first met Baroness Lili Radovich.

The courtly old noble merely sketched the mad pursuit of the richest noble of the steppe, after his wife's

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death, by the wild hearted woman who hoped to be the "prochaine amie" of the widowed Lord of Khaminavatka.

"Beware, my dear boy, of that dangerous charmer, the Baroness Lili! She is a fiend incarnate in her jealousy, and I know that she has hated Vera Orbeleff since that quiet repulse of Pierre's.

"But, la Princesse Vera is the ame damnée of General Andre Radovich, and Madame Lili very justly fears the only man in all the Ukraine who understands her.

"As for little Princesse Vera,—if poor Pierre had not known too much of her Frou-Frou life,—perhaps—she might have really won him over, for Vera Orbeleff's day dream was to marry your brother, and to end the feud forever, on the Dying Water! The devil who works the wires is Lili Radovich—and—she is patient, pitiless and persevering. She will cross your life—if she can."

It was all clear now, the careful tutelage of years which had led Magda Radovich up to the secret worship of Pierre's brother. "I can easily see the reason," mused Serge. "If Pierre's brother were to mate with Baron Radovich's child,—then—Madame Lili was checkmated—and—the way was open to Pierre's darkened heart. It has been the Baroness Lili's unslaked hatred which spread the foul snare entrapping my poor brother in the horrors of a seemingly accidental death."

The little mantle clock in the chalet, too soon chimed eleven! The sweet Cinderella of this soft spring night of love started. "You must take me down to the river, Serge," she reluctantly cried, "I have been thinking, thinking! We must have a danger signal! If anything occurs to prevent our meetings this week, as arranged, you must show red lights here,—at the windows of the summer house. If you drape thin red silk curtains here, I can see the red light, if you drop them.

"The others can not see these windows from the first and second stories of our house.

"And I will do the same! If you see a red light at my windows, you may know that some unforeseen danger threatens—and—that I can not come to you!"

"And then, and then, how shall I ever hear from you!" cried Serge, straining her to his heart, in a loving frenzy,

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"You must find a confidant,—a woman—do you not see?"

Her cool hand was on his burning brow. "She could steal over the river into the grove and meet me. There would be no suspicion, if I were seen, with any woman lingering there, for, I know all the peasants for ten miles up and down the Mertvovod! It must be one of your own women! For, my mother has a basilisk eye! Our women dread her very footstep! She would suspect, question—and—the poor victim of her wrath would die under the lash!

"Who is here to question such a deed on our lonely estate? Arcady would be her executioner!—and—then—her merciless vengeance would fall on me later. I know her strangely unforgiving nature! We have each but one friend,—Vera Orbeleff is mine, and,—Prince Youresief yours.

"Only at the last must either of them know. I would sooner die than tell my mother that sweet secret which would doom you to death! Oh! God be merciful! It is too hard! You,—you,—Serge—must find a confidant! I dare not write!

"I have no messenger—and—you shall not cross the Dying Water! Swear it to me—on our love—unless I bid you,—you will wait for me!" And Serge bowed his head, and plighted his solemn faith to calm her loving fears!

There was the hush of a half an hour of speechless tenderness before the Lord of the Manor led the sorrowing girl down to the little dell where the horses were tethered. He had reconnoitered with care—and, then—the balmy night breeze fanned their brows as the fleet Orloffs sprang down along the river banks.

From the sheep fold,—to the margin of the purling stream, was but a few steps, and,—after the skiff had touched the hostile shores, Serge Dumont stood, in a trance, as the slight figure was swallowed up in the darkness! The night had swallowed up his darling!

"May God bless my own darling!" he murmured, as, with powerful strokes of the paddle he soon regained the northern shore! He drove slowly homeward around the

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plantation, and, in his lonely sorrow, of the parting, still his soul was steeped in a deeper joy than he who hath fed upon the honeydews of Paradise. "Tender and true," he murmured, "Loyal à la mort!"

For murmuring trees, the distant nightingale, the singing stars, only spoke to him of the beloved, and his heart went out in fond affection and recollection to the lovers long since parted—the heirs of all the sweet sorrows of the past, who had wandered here by the Mertvovod in the old days tranced in the one bright thrall of life—Love's ecstatic dream. Their shadowy memories haunted him now.

He bore in his heart, now livened with the spring breath of an ennobling passion her promise to meet him when the silver stars swung up again from the under world.

"She shall be mine—mine forever," he swore again, in his heart of hearts—for he had been made her slave forever by the accolade of those dear clinging arms upon his neck. The spell of a mighty Love was upon him!

He was still pondering upon the possible choice of some trusty woman as a confidant, when he drove into the court-yard from the north, having driven circuitously around the whole plantations from the west to divert all suspicion. And—no one had dreamed of his evening tryst by the river!

As he entered his room, and laid away his arms, he sternly muttered, "Thank God! I did not meet that wretch—or, any of his hirelings, for his blood had never reached the temperature at which men slay and spare not,—when the clutch of their enemy's throat is dearer than even the soft encircling white arms of the one beloved woman!

The sound of hurrying feet startled him! He sprang up as a bevy of frightened attendants burst into his room.

The foremost was Tourko, the valet, with the weeping Anna Ivanouna.

"Poor old Chuchinka! the housekeeper," stammered the valet, recovering his composure before his master. "She fell dead at the supper table, and—so—we have waited for your return, Barin, to give the orders."

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With soldierly decision, Serge Dumont thought a moment! "Bring me the stable master at once!" His first thought was of the absent Intendant and Xenia, away at Bratskoe.

"I must have Boursakoff," he mused, "and—Xenia is the only sensible woman in the whole household! I may have a future use for her!"

When he had dispatched the Stable Master to send a courier on the gallop, to order Boursakoff to return, bringing the Pope from the village and Xenia, he turned to the weeping Anna Ivanouna "Take me to her!" he gravely said.

For his heart was smitten to see the last faithful one of the old regime taken forever from him.

Only in Russia does the sacred bond between the patrician and the peasant servant grow into a life union in which fidelity and affection have their just reward.

But, the niece of the old duenna knelt before her master! "Here are the keys, Barin," she sobbed. "No one has touched them. Who shall give the orders to the servants now?"

"Until to-morrow, Anna Ivanowna, you will be charged with the household! Then—you shall have your rest for the month of mourning. Take up the keys!"

And, then, with a heavy heart, the Master of Khaminavatka went down to gaze upon the kindly features of his old nurse, now softening into the calm repose of death. It was the snapping of the last cord binding him to his boyhood's days.

His light was still burning in his study when Boursakoff dashed into the court-yard, and hastening in from the stables made his report that the priest would arrive at daybreak.

"Xenia?" queried Serge.

"Is here to await your orders."

Over the samovar, the two men talked of the future disposition of the great household which had now lost its directing head.

Serge Dumont was startled when Boursakoff lifted his

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head and said, "There is but one person fit to take charge—and yet, the niece has her claims.

"If the Barin would allow me to advise. let Anna Ivanouna take the under household and the table service,—and—give to Xenia the general care of the whole chateau,—and the discipline of the servants. I have known her since girlhood.

"She is as true as steel, and—loyal to the death! She would die for you—now that you have taken her out of the hell on earth of that station, and—she has regained her vigor, and even her youth and womanly graces, are coming back to her."

It was on the morrow that Serge Dumont, after receiving the priest, sat long with Xenia, in listening to her report of the inquisition at Bratskoe.

When she had finished, the Master told her of the new rank which had fallen upon her in the household. The blushes burned upon her cheeks, and she trembled in a silent trance.

Standing before him, the ardent woman seized his hand and kissed it. "My life is yours, Barin!" she cried. "I will never fail you while I draw breath!" As she departed to summon her new coadjutor, the young lover suddenly sprang to his feet!

"This is the woman whom we need—this loyal, brave woman of our own village! I have found our confidante,—the one who is brave enough to cross the Dying Water, and bear my messages!

"And—if I should need to shelter Magda for a time, here is a woman who would die in her defense. For, sorrow has made her brave and silent!"

Before the funeral ceremonies of the aged housekeeper, the Intendant, marshaling the whole household, had placed the two women in charge of the chateau.

To the younger woman was given Chuchinka's pretty cottage in the row of offices at the southeast border of the vast enclosure, while the vigorous and stately Xenia, occupied the housekeeper's rooms in the chateau.

Silently, and with a firm hand, the grateful woman took up her task, her bosom thrilled with the self-devotion of a loyal heart to the young noble who had rescued

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her from the brutal domination of her heartless and drunken husband. She had gathered self-reliance and dignity in her lonely life at the Post Station.

The manor of Khaminavatka was excited with the varied preparations for the orthodox funeral of the venerated Chuchinka. Anna Ivanowna, the bereaved niece and heiress of the old housekeeper's store, was to be relieved from all duties in the first month of her mourning, as custom prescribed.

Already, the housekeeper's cottage was crowded with the mourning women, for, out in the emerald fields now, every man and available animal was busied with the plow.

The vast herds of sheep, cattle and horses were daily driven to pasture, and the steppe was alive with men and boys.

Serge Dumont blessed the negligent husbandry of his neighbor and enemy, for only a few listless Cossacks watched the careering herds of Baron Radovich's horses, destined for the Czar's dragoons, in due time. The fields were all fallow and left to grass.

"She is free to come freely to me, at least, for this happy week of their absence," mused the impatient lover, "but, in a month, the banks of the Dying Water will be haunted with lovers,—strolling pilgrims,—wandering farm laborers,—and vagabonds,—for all wanderers seek the cool banks of the only stream in a hundred square versts! My God! What can I do! I can not live without her now!"

He had ordered the most solemn funeral which the country side could offer for his faithful old nurse. The three days of public lying in state had begun. Dressed in her richest finery, on a catafalque in the open cottage, with burning candles lighting the "Readers" whose intoning of the "Psalms" were to be ceaseless in the three solemn days,—the faithful old duenna's face shone out yellow above the white-draped catafalque.

The village priest had departed to marshal his choir for the requiem and the "Everlasting Remembrances" were to be chanted in superb state.

Already the whole country side gathered to pay the

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"last visit," and even the passerby, nay, more,—the beggar and wayfarer,—entered to join in the last salutation to an orthodox soul, and receive refreshment or alms!

The village scribes were all busied in the preparation of the letters to be sent throughout the scattered neighborhood,—those quaint Muscovite missives, in which the dead "presents compliments and hopes that you may live long." To this euphemistic salutation,—the distant faithful courteously answer, "May the Kingdom of Heaven be yours." The stately salutation between the dead and the living, perhaps the only letter in the whole career of an unlettered peasant man or woman.

Professional mourners were fast gathering,—the handkerchief,—mortuary coin,—and nail parings for the last journey were duly prepared, and all the vehicles of the manor were now made ready for the last solemn procession to the Bratskoe church!

For, after a service for the immediate friends,—there was the long procession of bareheaded mourners to the distant church, where before the Royal Gates,—with the congregation bearing lighted tapers, the departed one would receive in the dead hand, the blessed Confession of Faith.

With brows crowned with the last coronet, with its gold-printed text, after the last kiss of peace from all,—when the Gospels were read and the lights extinguished,—the simple homily of the village Pope finished, the last anthems sung,—then, the return march to the open grave, where these solemn final words would consign the dead to eternal rest. The triumph of an orthodox career.

"The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, and the wide world, and they that dwell therein." There was the return march to the grave dug in the village cemetery.

Then, the wine glass of the Last Communion,—the ashes of the incense,—cast into the open grave,—each orthodox member of the family would cast in a handful of earth,—after the priest.

The ladder set up at the side of the grave to assist the soul in its ascent to Heaven,—the filling of the yawning pit, and,—after that the funeral feast,—the "trizna,"

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whereat, the guests would share the hospitality of the manor,—and even the beggars and wanderers have a separate feast, waited on by the family of the dead! All these quaint formalities marked the stately exit of a human soul to the Great Unknown!

Serge Dumont was alarmed to see the friendly peasants of the Radovich manor begin to come streaming over the dividing stream to the already notable obsequies. He had given the pope, the customary hundred roubles already for the services, and the same sum, for the forty days' mass and matins and the requiems. So—the golden way was duly paved!

But, a burning fever now assailed him, as he realized that for three days at least, it would be dangerous to dream of meeting the brave girl who now ruled his heart! He called Nicolas Boursakoff to his side.

"I am ill—sick at heart," he said. "It is impossible to have Madame Federoff or Wassili here,—the distances are too great—and—you—my faithful Intendant, must take charge and represent me, in all the obsequies. I rely on you—for the whole ceremonies, and,—I give you a free hand!" The Intendant departed, covered with the crowning honors of his life—to stand for the Master!

Then, seeking his rooms, Serge closed the doors upon all. The blaze of the afternoon sun lit up the mansion beyond the leafy banks of the Dying Water—and, hungry-hearted, he watched through his glass, the windows from whence the signals of love would blaze out that night!

He writhed in his anguish! "My God! I must open a way to her! In three or four days, the family will return! There will be Milovitch, the roué,—and, the mad Arcady,—crazed with rage by my escape from their snare! I shall be closely watched—and—she—would only rush into ruin—by any attempt. What can I do?" He was desperate even now!

While he pondered upon a hundred futile plans, there were hurrying feet sounding in the corridor, and the ringing voice of Xenia aroused him.

"Open! Barin—open quickly!" He sprang to the door and saw a look of alarm upon the woman's face.

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"What has happened?" he cried, springing up to meet her. In a few words, he learned of the arrival of her secret watch left at Bratskoe.

"Arcady Radovich came back, alone, to Bratskoe, at midnight! He has neither gone home nor to the General's villa, but, has visited every haunt of the lawless in the village, and left the town early to-day, with three or four desperate fellows, and, has crossed over onto our lands!

"There is some great danger—Barin! He is hiding somewhere near—perhaps in the plantations,—with his villains! What must be done? You shall not venture out, alone. Beware of going down into the park at night!"

The young lover gazed at the woman's heaving bosom and sparkling eyes. She had grown vigorous and graceful under the easy comfort of all the past months of peace and happiness.

"Was your husband with them?" Serge asked, anxiously.

"No! He is still at the station. There is not a day that Marika does not send me word from the meadow farms of his movements! He is there—with his new wife,—drunken—and happy. You must send out spies through the plantation and drive these wretches away! Let your men go down the banks of the river, and creep up through the ravines! There is some deadly mischief afoot!" The brave woman's cheeks were ashen pale.

"Not yet,—not yet, Xenia," said her master. Then, with a sudden impulse, he took both her hands in his own. "Would you do me a service, Xenia—one that no mortal must ever know of?" he cried, his voice trembling with emotion.

"I am a girl of the steppe,—your own," she proudly said, and, drawing out her natal cross upon her neck chain, she kissed it.

"On the cross,—I am yours,—to my death!" she murmured, kissing it. Her eyes burned with a strange new fire.

Serge Dumont bent his proud head. "Do you know

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the Baroness Magda?" he whispered, as if loth to let that beloved name pass his lips.

The fiery-hearted woman saw the secret of his heart at a glance. She looked frankly in his eyes. "Arcady often stopped with her at our station. She knows me from her childhood—the beautiful Day Star!"

"I must have a letter reach her own hands, before sundown," the haggard lover said, speaking as if in a dream. "And no one on earth must ever know but you! Can you do it for me?" His whole happiness hung upon her answer.

"What can not a Russian woman do for love,—for those who love,—for those whom God has given to each other?" said Xenia, with swimming eyes.

"But, they all know you—over there"—cried Serge—throwing aside the curtain. "Arcady would maltreat you—perhaps kidnap you for your husband's revenge."

Xenia laughed defiantly. "Is your letter ready?" she asked.

"It will be in a half an hour," replied her master, his heart leaping up fired with a new hope.

"Then, give me the key of your chalêt," Xenia resolutely said. "Come down there in half an hour. I will be all ready—and, in another hour, the letter will be in her hands! I know every winding of the river, every corner of their house and grounds,—I used to play there, as a child."

"I give you my life, my soul, my heart, my honor into your faithful hands—Xenia—and hers," solemnly said Serge.

"You are to take this ring and show it to her—and—then,—bring it back to me!"

The gallant-hearted woman kissed it reverently and hung the ring upon her neck chain, concealing it in her panting bosom. "I go now," she cried. "Let me be quick, for Arcady will not dare show himself in the sunlight! He is a sly fox at his tricks!"

Ten minutes later, while penning his letter, Serge Dumont saw Xenia gliding swiftly down the garden paths, with a bundle under each arm.

When he approached the door of the chalêt, in a half an hour, the little house was locked upon the inside.

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Down in the gardens, the horde of boys, girls and women were toiling, and laughter and merriment resounded.

He knocked softly on the door, and started back, as he sprang into the room.

For there, before him, insinuating and dashing, stood a gaudily dressed Gypsy singer.

The glittering head dress,—spangled skirts,—the bright colored bodice,—the tambourine, and two burning eyes gleaming out of a dark waving mass of silken hair, from the dusky countenance.

As the woman glided to his side, he marked the voluptuous grace and daringly exposed shapely form, the charms which had once made Xenia, the peerless village beauty.

She caught up a knife from the table and hid it in her bosom. "Give me the letter, Barin! I must be gone," she cried, as she seized her tambourine.

She was crooning over half-forgotten Tzigane songs and, the young noble marveled at her sinuous grace and lissome body.

"I will hide behind the house, till you bring me the key," she said. "When I return I will dress myself here again, and—then—come direct to your room. Trust to me!"

With a swift motion, she hid the precious letter deep in her bosom, and then stole out of the door! When Serge Dumont followed her into the fringing shrubbery and handed her the key, she bent her head and kissed his hand in silence!

There was a parting of the leaves, a swaying of the bushes as of a gliding panther stealing on its prey, and the false Tzigane girl was lost to sight!

The young noble was astounded at the rapid transformation of Xenia's whole appearance. In the audacious semi-undress of the strolling singer, she was as enticing as any of the wild-eyed young maenads who work their witcheries upon the Guard's officers on the Islands of the Neva, in the hot-hearted revels of Peters-

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burg. "No wonder they called her a beauty! She is a hidden Venus!" he cried.

Back to his own splendid chambers, the Master wandered,—his heart following his devoted messenger. "She skirted the cliffs like a shadow stealing along," he mused, and then all his memories of the adroitness of the village girls in keeping a stolen tryst, came back.

"She is as keen-eyed as a lynx," he sighed, "but, there are hidden dangers! If they should find out her secret, there may be death before her!" For, well, Serge Dumont knew that the voiceless steppe has its own horrible secrets. She might never reappear—the first trench would cover her forever.

The long afternoon wore away, and he was roused at last from a fevered sleep, by the entrance of Doctor Boris Yaroslaw, the confidential physician of that grand old seigneur Prince Youresief.

Shame-faced at his deception,—Serge Dumont submitted himself to the silent inspection of the retired old army surgeon. Yaroslaw shook his head doubtfully, as he felt the noble's bounding pulse.

"What have you been doing with yourself, Major?" he cried. "I shall have to order you at once out of the steppe! It is either the old Tartar malaria—or else some creeping fever. You must not wither up here among these moujiks and half-human Cossacks. Come, now—I shall order you over the frontier, for six months!" A new fear smote upon the lover's hungry heart! He was trapped by his own deception!

In vain, Serge protested that he had only sent the courier to call the Doctor to aid the dead Chuchinka, the venerable heirloom of fidelity.

The surgeon looked grave. "There is something wrong either in your head or heart! I'll stay and give you a good looking over!" Then, bending his bushy brows on the secret lover, he sharply asked, "Have you any mental trouble?"

Serge shook his head sadly. "You are ten years older than when you passed out of the Regiment! This is a Nova Zembla in winter, a flaming hell in summer, and the raw spring and chilly autumn are malarial! God

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meant the Nogay Tartars alone, to inhabit these wastes!

"One word—if you sleep down in that park, where the marsh exhalations linger, you will soon join your family over in the chapel! Or,—go mad—like Arcady Radovich! I met him this afternoon, half way to the Post Station, riding along like a demon, followed by two wretched-looking scoundrels! He is a disgrace to the noblesse, and I shall see the Baron and General Radovich and beg them, to get him out of Kherson."

"Which way was he riding?" languidly asked Serge, with a secret alarm. "As the crow flies over the steppe, straight for the ford on the Dying Water—evidently going back to the Baron's mansion! The station keeper told me he had been there an hour before I watered my horses."

Serge Dumont's face darkened. He saw the hidden plot to spy out his every movement, and he registered a vow to have every strange man chased off the wide domain.

"Boursakoff will fix that gang,—very soon"—growled Serge—as his hungry eyes turned toward the distant mansion where Xenia's life was in pawn.

"My God! If he should detect her!" groaned Dumont.

The splendid tête-à-tête dinner was over, and the stars were swinging to the west, before the heartsick lover heard aught of Xenia, the Tzigane of a day!

He had artfully retired to his rooms, and, was watching the darkened windows of Magda Radovich across the sullen flowing stream, when a dark-robed figure glided into his room. "All is well"—she cried. Xenia's voice trembled as she handed him a letter.

"I delayed at the chalêt to take off the stains and dress —I would have been with you two hours ago, but, I met Arcady Radovich at the ford. He was drunken, as usual he took me for a strolling Zingara! I broke away—and hid in the bushes till it was safe to return."

She was deathly pale—and never told her master of the deep gash her knife had cut across the back of the brutal noble's ruffianly hand. For, she had struggled in the

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scoundrel's embrace and then, cut herself loose,—like a Malay running amok!

CHAPTER VII.

THE RED DANGER LIGHT.

Serge Dumont, with glowing eyes, read the letter for which Xenia had risked her life and, then, his heart leaped up in a wild vow of loyalty to death! He was lost in a dream of the future until the tired woman, still standing before him, timidly handed him the key of the chalêt and the precious token of the ring so solemnly binding the vows in the church.

"It is late, Barin," murmured Xenia, with downcast eyes. "I must not be seen coming out of your rooms at midnight!" For, she remembered even now, the jealous frowns at her sudden promotion to her new master's side.

"Sit down, Xenia," gravely replied her master. "I shall go down and sleep in the chalêt! You can stay here, and,—in the morning leave the rooms before daybreak! You have the keys of the whole house now. Tell me now what you would do as regards these lurking spies of Arcady's." And, Xenia, with reddened cheeks and heaving bosom, obeyed him.

The resolute woman answered quickly, "Chuchinka's funeral is day after to-morrow. You could do nothing on that day. All are sacred then. Send out Boursakoff to-morrow, with a dozen good men and all the dogs. Let the whole plantation be well scoured. Gather up all the stragglers and hold them here, in captivity.

"Then,—send for the Chief of Police at Bratskoe,—hear their story first! After that let me see them first,—then the Chief of Police can examine them. All the illegal men and worthless ones have passed by our station. I know the whole village of Bratskoe.

"If we find these fellows lying, then—let Boursakoff give them a good lashing and turn them off the manor! They will never return! But,—you must not even men-

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tion Arcady Radovich's name. Let Boursakoff have a score of mounted Cossacks kept busy riding around the whole plantations. They will capture any one who tries to sneak away!

"Yesterday—you might have caught that wretch Arcady,—to-morrow—you will not find him!" Her voice had a fierce ring in it. She remembered his slashing wound, now festering.

"Why?" impatiently queried Serge.

"Because," gravely answered the woman, her eyes flashing, "he was so brutally violent with me, that he will not dare to show himself out of the mansion until the Baron and Baroness return. He tried to overpower me—and,—I fought for my life!" She concealed the secret of the knife thrust which freed her!

The brave girl never told her master of the floods of blood drenching her bizarre Tzigane disguise, from the slashing cut across the back of the hand which paralyzed the roué's deadly grip.

"If I had only struck home"—she mused, "it would have freed the poor Baroness Magda forever from her most dangerous enemy—but,—all men would have looked to my master—as the midnight assassin—in revenge for Barin Pierre! But,—he must never know—no, the dove-eyed darling over there." She resolutely sealed her lips.

"You are right, Xenia! Remain here! I will steal out of the chateau and go over and wake up Boursakoff! I will give him his orders and—at daybreak we will silently surround the plantations! By noon, they will all be thoroughly searched, and the brutes who do not fall into our drag net, will be caught by the Cossacks! It is a good plan!"

"Barin!" timidly said Xenia, as she started forward and laid her hand upon her master's arm! "There is another protection! Boursakoff only waits for the finishing of the plowing and sowing to marry pretty Marika at the meadow farms.

"You have only enemies now over at the Post Station—and,—the Radovichs are very liberal with the people of the meadow farms.

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"Let Boursakoff marry Marika, at once, and—then—you will have faithful guardians in the families at the meadows. For, Boursakoff's wife would be surely warned by her kinsmen of any plots against you!"

Serge Dumont gazed on the handsome peasant woman with a growing surprise. "You would have made a General,—if you were a man, Xenia!" he said, as he moved away. "I shall have the wedding hastened, at once, and Nicolas shall put a good man there at the meadows, in charge of our relay teams to Novokrainka! He can always get a boy as messenger—and—so, we will be better guarded."

In half an hour, the anxious lover returned! His troubled heart was at rest, for he knew that the Day Star was now warned not to approach the river banks, and to show no lights of love lest the sneaking Arcady should suspect. Of that wretch's sudden return,—the lonely girl was duly apprised by the safe delivery of her lover's letter. He had guarded every avenue of danger now!

But, his heart sank within him as he looked forward to the return of the parents, with the ever-present Milovitch.

This, with Arcady's presence, would cut off all communication with the woman whom he had sworn to make his wife—as soon as any form of union could be devised which would not end in the absolute ruin of his own family—or the bloodshed—for which the cowardly Arcady now panted.

"Tell me, Xenia, of your voyage," the heart-hungry man cried to his sole human confidant. "I have arranged all with the Intendant! He will be married next week, and, he will now station two or three of our brightest boys at Bratskoe to watch the slightest movement of both branches of the Radovichs.

"One of them can ride over at any moment in a half an hour, and—the mail service is a complete excuse—together with your necessary purchases as housekeeper. You can go over there almost daily—and watch the enemy."

And, then, with a growing delight, Serge learned of Xenia's entrance into the courtyard of the Baron's great

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establishment,—the gathering of the chateau attendants, and the final appearance of the young Baroness.

With her dances and songs the messenger had soon put all in a good humor, and it was easy to attract the attention of the lonely girl.

With a quick wit, Baroness Magda led the Tzigane away to her own rooms to tell her fortune, and—once there, the embassy of Love was easily effected.

Serge listened, his head resting on his hands, as Xenia described every detail of the young Baroness' lofty nest under the eaves of the old chateau, whither she had fled to establish herself as far as possible from her parents' daily bickerings—and Arcady's nightly carousing.

Every trifle light as air was manna to his hungry soul, and—at last, he sighed. "It is all over now! There is no further chance to communicate! There will be no light in the window—and—we must only wait—parted in sorrow—until I can act without her certain ruin or driving her into a convent—or—another man's arms! For, General Radovich would act at once! Some wild rich Boyar would be her bosom's lord—and—then, the world would be a blank for me."

"Not so, Barin," calmly said Xenia. "To-morrow night, I am to cross here in the fields where all their peasants work, clad in a peasant toiler's dress. There is a ravine beyond the house, opening into the garden! There I can meet the Baroness Magda and take her letter, giving her yours.

"No one would dream of stopping a peasant woman at night, and I shall be mingled with their people! They have now three hundred in the low fields along the Mertvovod! You shall have your news!

"Trust to me, and, if the Baroness can not meet me, every day, we will then find a place where she can hide the letters and I can leave yours. If I were discovered—in my own true character—even Arcady would not dare to touch me!

"The only thing is to have Boursakoff watch my cruel husband, that he does not stray over here! For, if he found me alone over there,—on the lonely steppe,—he is an ugly brute, and he would kill me,

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"He well knows there is no road past Barin Alexandre's place—no wayfarers—and—if he slew me—and covered me up—Arcady would protect him! There are no outside witnesses over there! But—Arcady Radovich himself will never trap me! I fear only my husband's revenge, for, the brute tried to use my poor charms to draw custom to his thieves' den, there at the Post Station."

"You shall be protected, Xenia, with my life," warmly said Serge. "I have now given all my orders! You can go now! There are no servants stirring in the halls. But,—tell me. You know the whole life of the steppe—you know the Baroness Radovich and all about the family. What can I do? Is there anything I can do?" They stood at the door where Xenia had peered out to watch for any straggling servant!

"Take her away from there,—forever!" whispered Xenia, her eyes aflame. "She loves you blindly! They will soon break her heart! Take her away! Are you not the Lord of Khaminavatka?"

And, then, she swiftly glided down the dark corridor to her own rooms, leaving Serge Dumont trembling with the ecstasy of a wild dream of life and love, with the Day Star sheltered in his strong arms. Was the serf-born woman braver than her lord?

"Ah! God! It is impossible! impossible," he sighed—as he began a weary tramp of the vast apartment! "For, Fate is stronger than our love,—we are caught in its iron jaws!" He saw the stars sink low in the west before he threw himself down to sleep, with Magda Radovich's letter resting on his heart.

The night had brought no new counsel, and Serge Dumont vainly begged his unwilling guest, Doctor Boris Yaroslaw, to linger on the unhappy Mertvovod. There had been a last serious conference after breakfast, and the choleric old army surgeon refused to be a useless breaker of bread at the noble's table.

"I find you all at sea, in your whole purposes of life"—growled the Surgeon. "You are not a practical country proprietor, like poor Pierre—God rest his soul! You are a war horse yoked to the plow! Had you married,—

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if you had your equals and associates here,—or even near enough for social intercourse,—it were different! I tell you now, I shall tell Youresief—if you do not turn your estate over to your matchless Intendant, Boursakoff here and, go back where you can live a life for heart, body and soul—you will either break down—or else go mad!

"Travel for six months, or else—go back to the Regiment—those are my orders! One last saving clause—marry! Marry some one—any one of your own rank and grade,—but—do not sink into the death in life of a morbid, lonely man! You are rich enough to live as an absentee either in Petersburg,—Moscow,—Vienna or Paris."

Serge shook his head, and, after vain pleading, ordered his horse and galloped a few leagues on the road with the disgruntled Doctor, who only accepted a hamper of Madeira,—a splendid road luncheon,—and a couple of boxes of Imperiales under protest. The heated argument continued until the parting moment.

As they parted, Yaroslaw fired his last volley, "I shall have the Prince and Madame Barbe take you in hand! I am done! You will hear from them soon!"

When Serge reined up in the courtyard with a triumphant smile, the sturdy Boursakoff came out to greet him! "I have already five rascals locked up in the stone storehouse, Barin!" he reported. "They had camped in the grounds—and—they all swear that they are pilgrims to Kief—good orthodox religionists! But—they are a sorry lot—and—they all had clubs and knives! It looks ominous!"

It was the work of a half an hour for Serge to receive the report of the alert Xenia, who was taken with other members of the household to view the suspected men.

Waiting in his room, the manor lord soon received the argus-eyed woman's secret report! "Two of them are vile scoundrels from Bratskoe—one who consorted often, with the dead man whom the dogs slew," she said —with a shudder—"and—the others are less familiar, but I have seen them. They are no honest pilgrims."

In ten minutes, a lad was galloping away for the Chief of Police.

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It was near sundown when a band of mounted Cossacks escorted the rascals a half dozen versts out upon the steppe. Their backs were all burning with a two score of lashes well laid on! "Hark ye, my men," cried the Intendant. "The Chief of Police has given us permission to hunt you off our lines with our dogs!

"Show another hangdog face here—and you shall find how sharp our wolfhounds' teeth are!"

The frightened wretches streamed away in terror, and the Intendant soon reported the establishment of a day and night patrol of the whole estate! The Chief of Police reported his intention to patrol the whole Dying Water thoroughly for a week.

On the vigil of Chuchinka's funeral, Serge Dumont sat late in council with the Intendant. The young lover had recognized at once the cool decision and marvelous cunning of the brave-hearted Xenia.

To her, alone, he vowed to turn for counsel and guidance. For, the bond between Xenia and her new master was their common love for the dead Pierre,—their knowledge of the killing of the wretch at the Post Station,—and the catastrophe which drove Xenia to the protection of her natal Khaminavatka had placed her, with her children, as hostages of Fate, in the palace of the steppes —for—there alone—could the spirited woman be safe from the moody vengeance of her now desperate husband.

The woman whom he had beaten and abused was now far away, out of his reach, behind the sacred walls of the chateau by the Mertvovod. Her life was even princely compared with the dark drudgery of her sad past!

"Boursakoff," slowly said his master. "You must marry, at once, as soon as these funeral ceremonies are done—and, establish our northern guard at the meadow farm! You will need your honeymoon! Anna Ivanowna has her mourning forty days. See to it to-morrow that you post our people at Bratskoe!

"Let the patrol of the domain report to me daily! Then, I will answer for all—for I shall no longer tamely suffer any trespass of these Radovichs. Watch that Post

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Station! I want a daily report! There is but one vital matter for you!

"Order every one around the chateau to absolutely obey Xenia's orders in future, for I must rely on her—while you and Anna Ivanowna are busy with your respective joy and sorrow.

"Put all the plowing, planting and sowing in the hands of the second Intendant! Let him report for orders to me,—daily!

"Now—as for your wedding, marry at once, and—quietly. In place of my presence at your wedding, here is a thousand roubles, and—you have a month now of leisure. I do not want Arcady Radovich to know of our new safeguards against his tricks.

"But, redouble every vigilance as to that dangerous fool! On the very next outrage of the kind, I shall go to the Marechale de Noblesse at Bobrinetz. Prince Youresief will call up General Radovich,—the Baron,—and this high-born outcast!

"I will expose matters which will soon put them out of the Cercle de Noblesse, and this brute Milovitch, too, out of the army!

"Then,—if they seek a duello, I have disgraced them first—and—shall decline to fight any of them! After that—it will be the old steppe days—we will hold our lines by force of arms, against everything but the name of the Czar! And—woe to them—woe to them—if they tread down even a blade of grass! I will strike with the strong hand—and God help them if they drive me to it!"

The happy Intendant, with tears of joy, departed to send a messenger out through the darkness of the night to tell the pretty Marika, of the thousand roubles donation which made them rich beyond all their dreams of fortune.

"The pope shall go over to the meadow farms the morning after the funeral! I will bring my wife home that same night, and, shall arrange all, while our kinsmen are gathered there at the wedding!

"Fear not,—Barin, we outnumber the Radovichs three to one,—and,—your people here will die in your defense. You are safer than the Czar himself!"

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It was midnight when Xenia, dressed in a field peasant worker's garb stole into her master's rooms, where he was impatiently awaiting her.

He tore open the letter and then sprang up with a cry of despair.

"My God!" was Serge's unavailing cry. "They are coming back in two days, and the whole family, following the plans of Baroness Lili and Colonel Milovitch are going to Kief.

"It will be an absence of two months, and—if she is named as Maid of Honor, Baroness Magda will be dragged around, visiting until September! Then,—the court will swallow her up! My poor darling! She will be sacrificed to advance General Radovich's ambitions! Of course, her mother will follow on—to share in all the pleasures and splendors on the Neva!"

Serge paused, and faced Xenia, whose eyes were gleaming with a suppressed fire. "Tell me, how did Arcady Radovich receive a severe wound? Baroness Magda writes that he has a terribly wounded hand, and—in the event of the family leaving, will be forced to remain, in charge! There will be a hidden warfare with him! God help him, if he braves me after they have dragged her away! His blood be on his own head!" But, then he recalled his vow to Princess Vera and he dropped his head in his hands!

"There is no help but Youresief—and—what can he do?" he muttered. Xenia sprang to her master's side.

"Be of good cheer! Barin! Be of good cheer! I fancy that drunken wretch fell down while chasing me last night and, so wounded himself! But, I can tell you a little secret! The letter was written to be ready for me—and, we have found a place in the ravine where there is a hollow rock! I can steal over and find the letters there, and leave yours!

"The Barina all day has been looking for this hiding place. She has had time to make a new plan! She will not quarrel with her watchful mother, but the day before they leave for Kief, she will have an accident,—a fall,—a sprained ankle! You know well enough," said the sharp-witted woman, "that Baroness Lili only

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goes to Kief to be near Milovitch! It is some one of their wild intrigues!

"Every peasant on the Dying Water knows the secret which only Baron Alexandre seems to be ignorant of!

"And—so—I was told to bring you this token, and to tell you that the Barina Magda will not go to Kief—but—for God's sake, be careful! For, Arcady Radovich will know that you have caught his spies!

"He will not cease to plot against you!

"There must be no thought of a meeting until he can be got out of the way. The Barina fears his ill will! She bade me tell you that she will signal you of any sudden danger or trouble by a red light in her windows! One red light, one window only—if she is in trouble or danger—and two—if Arcady is plotting against you!"

"But, no other signals are to be made—none at all—only when you have seen her signals, you are to show a red light in all the windows of the chalêt! As for me,—I can see her to-morrow night—and, the night after that! For then—the tiger cat Baroness Lili will be at home!

"She is a human devil—and—all I can do is to steal over in the night and get the letters! I shall go over at different times, so as not to be suspected—or followed. Remember to do her bidding! She is breaking her heart!

"For, she fears that they may force her away to the Court, and that your enemies then will trap you! Arcady and Colonel Milovitch are the enemies of all the unprotected on the River Bug! And—the Colonel would cover up Arcady's crimes!"

Serge Dumont was pacing the room like a restless tiger. "Let me think! I must think! It is too horrible! Thank God! If she does leave the steppe—I can make short work of Arcady and Milovitch! They shall be struck, as if by lightning."

"Not so! Barin!" cried the woman in whose veins the fiery blood of the steppe flowed. "That is the way to lose her forever. Listen to a Russian girl!

"There is but one way! She is now yours, by every law that we children of the steppe know. Be prudent! Wait! It is for her—the nunnery or else some stranger

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forced upon her as a husband to drive her mad! Wait to the very last! Then, steal her away from them all! Why do you not hide her, here?

"I would guard her with my life! They could never find her! That is a Boyar's revenge—a sweet one! Wait, and— do not quarrel with these cowardly brutes! If you took her out of the land, they would follow you,—and—the Czar would listen to the General's story! But—trust to me! Be watchful as the Ukraine wolf—and,—I will help you when the time comes! I belong to you now—to you—alone!"

"My poor Xenia! You talk wildly"—sadly said Serge Dumont. "Go now! I thank you a thousand times! To-morrow is the funeral,—you will remain here, in the chateau. It will be closed to all. You have every key! Boursakoff will tell you of my orders!

"He will be married the day after, and—you are to be the one head of the household, until he and the mourner are again at their duties!

"I will have letters for you to-morrow night! You are to rest yourself all the day, so that you can meet her for me! You are right! When her mother returns, there is no chance of our meeting—and—who knows what villainy Arcady may plot!

"As for your wild words—where would I hide her? It is madness,—and—how could I marry her! There is but one way—the Czar's permission—which is both a permission—and,—an order!

"None but Youresief could ever get that for me—and—if the Prince should speak, she would be married to some favorite of the General's before I could act! There is no hope—none!

"For her ruin stares me in the face if I make a single move! Go now,—remember,—not a soul enters the chateau to-morrow. Boursakoff will direct the whole funeral ceremonies in my poor old friend's cottage!"

And then, Xenia glided away, with her speaking eyes fixed on her unhappy master.

When Serge Dumont was alone, his excited mind suddenly recalled the hidden apartments on the east side of the great mansion. "Does some olden tragedy re-

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peat itself?" he murmured, as he lay down to rest haunted by the pleading eyes which had gazed down on him from the old picture which seemed to shed a consecrating halo of beauty over that forgotten past.

Xenia's mad suggestion burned in his brain! "Hopeless, hopeless," he sighed. "Pierre Dumont's innocent blood flows between us! There is a dark secret of guilt driving this wretch on to despair—and—the guilty never forgive!"

He recalled his oath to Princess Vera. "I am not to be the first to strike,—but,—if they break the peace—then,—I will strike home!"

His heart melted as he called up the tender face of the pure hearted girl environed with the corrupt and heartless circle seeking to sell her to the highest bidder—after forcing her into the blinding light of the court on the Neva,—a helpless lamb,—a sacrifice to vanity and greed!

Old stories of the Grand Duke's, and their fulsome familiarities came back to haunt him. and—the brave resolute words of the warm blooded daughter of the people stirred his veins like strong wine!

"If they play her false—then,—then—." He fell into a troubled sleep,—dreaming that he walked through the silent upper chambers to steal into the long deserted secret apartment, to find there upon the threshold, his beautiful beloved awaiting him, with opened arms, with softly shining eyes!

He dreamed that in that dim retreat, their hearts throbbed against each other in the exquisite bliss of a double happiness.

Bright sunlight gleamed upon the rolling hills of the Mertvovod,—fleecy white clouds hung above suspended in the deep azure sky, and the far stretching steppe was struggling into an emerald green as the long funeral procession wound westward through the leafy plantations of the vast domain toward Bratskoe.

Bare-headed, and devout, the entire population of the two villages, followed the catafalque of the dead Chuchinka,—the last relic of the old serf regime.

With lighted tapers, waving banners, and weird melancholic chants, the cortege slowly moved around the hill.

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There were twenty alert mounted Cossacks swiftly traversing the estate, and a dozen more watched every avenue of the chateau grounds.

The vast masonry pile towered up, its windows showing no sign of life,—for, every door was locked and barred. Within, Xenia ruled over the attendants who were preparing the royal funeral feast, and guarded the great mansion, for there were scores of stragglers and beggars attracted by the perfunctory hospitality awaiting the return before sundown of the funeral train.

Under the truce of God, of the solemn day, and spurred on by a long whetted curiosity, dozens of the peasants of the Radovich manor, had openly crossed the dividing line to join with the orthodox of Khaminavatka in mourning the venerable housekeeper, whose name and fame had gone out to the uttermost village of the Kherson steppes.

With a self protective instinct, Serge Dumont had closed the whole inclosure of the chateau, leaving only a few alert men from the stables and offices, on guard! He wished none of the wanderers to become familiar with the face of Xenia, now the only confidant of the secret of his life.

And, he had withdrawn himself from the motley throng to pen the messages of love and trust which Xenia was to bear that night across the Dying Water.

He lingered irresolute over his task, for the return of the Radovich family would now make the secret communication almost too dangerous to attempt. And—there was the honor of a peerless woman to guard!

His blood was at fever heat! He paced the little room for hours in debate as to whether he dared accompany Xenia, on her dangerous voyage. "If Arcady were not at home, Xenia could bring her down to the grove, I could steal over there, and, in case of surprise, Magda would be only found alone with the woman!" His heart craved another interview, and yet, too well he knew that Arcady Radovich would know at once of the capture and punishment of his spies.

"No!" the young lover cried. "It would be too cowardly! The punishment would fall on her alone!" And

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yet the journey to Kief might separate them for long months. If the Day Star were to be skilfully detained by her mother's artful hidden amours, and then, hurried to St. Petersburg, in the winter, there would be General Radovich and the fiery young brother to outwit—probably—the mother also.

"Princess Vera," he mused. "She might aid!" And then he sighed, for well he knew the butterfly of fashion was in the power of that wily old viveur General André Radovich. "A single word from him, a poisoned shaft, and her prochain ami, the Minister of War, might cast her off. Alas! No! she has to pipe to their dancing—and,—an Aide de Camp of the Emperor is a powerful functionary." It was almost a hopeless juncture.

Xenia's wild plan of the night before returned again and again to haunt him. "It is simple madness! For one sight of her face in the light of day, and the law would be invoked—as well as the blood vengeance of these wild Serbian aristocrats. Her life would be as prisonlike as the living death of the Iron Mask! I could do nothing for her, legally. If I were to die—she would be left a helpless waif!" He recalled the implacable hatred of his own family to the hereditary enemies.

All was dark—all was hopeless! During the long morning, he mounted to the roof of the chalet a dozen times to explore the ground of his neighbor enemy with his field glass.

Was it only a cheat of the senses—or did he see a white robe fluttering there among the blossoming trees!

With a wild access of passion, he cried: "By God! She shall be mine, even if the gates of death yawn before us!" And, the insidious suggestions of Xenia came back to haunt his passionate heart! He was dreaming, with fiercely throbbing pulses when the woman whose bold suggestion had aroused the fierce passions of his heart glided into the chalet.

"Barin! I have made ready your breakfast! I will serve you myself! And—there is a courier with letters!"

Slowly the young noble threaded the sloping walk up from the park, where in the bygone days so many light

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feet, now at rest, forever, had wandered in the sweet unrest of Love.

He listlessly turned over his letters, while the rich meats stood untasted at his side and Xenia watched him with a quickened heart.

The docile peasant woman turned away with a sigh. "He will go mad,—unless the Day Star comes to bless his life," she murmured, as in secret she revolved in her mind the words with which she purposed to arouse the latent energies of Magda Radovich's heart that night!

"Only a woman can know a woman's ways! I shall tell her of his sufferings. There must be an end to this! But—Arcady"—she shuddered, as she whispered to herself. "If he were only dead,—if I had only struck home!"

Serge Dumont tossed aside with a curling lip, a letter of warning from Prince Youresief, now at Elizabethgrad, on his homeward journey from the Regimental Ball. "I shall see your sister Madame Federoff! You must not be left alone,—out there on the silent steppe.

"For, both Colonel Milovitch and Arcady were loud in denouncing your insult in not attending the ball. You know why Milovitch acts as Baroness Lili's tame bear! Beware of treachery! For God's sake, surround yourself with friends—or else—leave the steppe! There is foul play ahead! You must come to me as soon as you can! I am responsible for ending this vendetta—and—Princess Vera and myself have a plan. You will soon hear from her." He cast the letters aside with a sad smile. "Useless—all useless," he muttered.

Serge's letters from his sister, and the happy young Wassili were of no moment, but over the letter of Princess Vera—he knitted his brows in amazement as he read:

"I shall come down to the Kherson a month before General Radovich has asked me to Bratskoe to meet a gay house party. Young Ivan will be there with some brother officers of the Preobajenskys.

"I have also been asked to Prince Youresief's at Bobrinetz, and I have a little plan of my own!

"Magda Radovich has been placed on the list of Maids

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of Honor, and of course she will come to the court this winter.

"Such an appointment is never declined,—for who would dare to brave the will of the Tsaritza.

"The General is now very anxious to court Prince Youresief's influence to obtain the army contracts for Magda's father, and, I have his promise that Magda shall come and make a visit of a fortnight with the Youresiefs!

"Now, Major, if you should quietly go to Ekaterinoslav the last week in May, you will have letters there from me! You can then take post horses and come over to Bobrinetz.

"Magda will be there, under my care! There will be no one else, for Baroness Lili, the Baron and Arcady are going to Kief, where Colonel Milovitch has a two months' detail of temporary duty!

"Where Lili goes, Arcady will follow, for you know, as well as I, that he covers up the intrigue between Baroness Lili and that black devil Milovitch!

"I wish to have my dearest Magda removed forever from her home,—for, with such a mother, the crazy uncle and the hoodwinked father, her life is a living hell! Even the Court, with all its dangers, is a safer place for her! She knows nothing of her appointment, but I wish you to meet her before the fall season.

"Every day at court, your nephew and her brother will meet on palace duty. You may, through her, establish a lasting peace—and, you will meet an angel when you see her!

"I have toiled unremittingly to arrange this! You know the Prince and Princess Youresief will never even mention your presence.

"That has been my first thought! And so—you will meet my darling,—but, for God's sake make no effort to find her, on the Dying Water! Nothing but blood and tears would follow! She is now the property of the Crown—for you know the Tzaritza portions off—and marries all the Maids of Honor!

"I send this to your sister, for well I know Madame Federoff only sends your letters by courier.

"I have written thus early—for you can never come to

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see me at Bratskoe, during my visit at General Andrè's villa—though I shall, alone, drive over one day to see your magnificent palace on the steppe.

"It is haunted with memories of the noblest man on earth—your brother Pierre."

When Serge Dumont dropped the fatal letter, he saw that Magda Radovich was lost to him forever in marriage! "My poor master!" cried Xenia, as she sprang to his side. "I must see her—I must meet her, at once,—before these people return!" cried Serge, seizing the brave woman's hands.

"Our whole lives—the future—all depends on it!" His face had the ashen color of death. "I would brave anything—face death itself—if she is only safe! Tell me—tell me, is there no way?"

Xenia's burning eyes studied his countenance.

"Only one," she faltered. "The young Barina goes to confession to the pope at Bratskoe. I could arrange that! Alas! That he is busy to-day and to-morrow! I know the priest's wife. She is fond of money! You could make her a present, and, you could quietly go to the priest's house! No one would know.

"After the confession, you could meet her there, and she could go away first! If Arcady goes with the other three to Kief—you are then safe! I could go into Bratskoe, and detain the priest in the church, while you have a half an hour with the Barina.

"But, only—if the others go away! My God! It is a fearful risk! If she crosses the river now it is madness, for the valley is full of stragglers seeking work.

"And, I know that heartless human wolf, Arcady—even if he goes away—he will leave spies to watch over the Barina Magda! Once that he suspects—there is but one way,—and that is to kill him!" she cried, with flashing eyes. "Kill the dog! He tried to——." She turned away to hide her tears of rage. The child of the steppe had not forgotten his brutality.

Serge Dumont hastened away to pour out his soul upon paper,—to tell the darling of his heart, the snares set for her feet,—of her cold dedication to the vicarious attentions of the easy going Grand Dukes,—and then,—

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the honorable pension of a suggested marriage with some complaisant courtier!

"Better in her grave, my Magda," he vowed, as he wrote, with tears of burning rage falling on the paper.

"At every hazard, I will see her,—we shall meet,—at the priest's—if it must be—and—rather than see her innocent beauty hawked in the Court, after the bloom has been brushed away, by God—I will take her away,—far away, to Italy!"

He had finished all his long soul commune, when he spoke—the letter was ready, for the approach of nightfall!

But, his hands fell helplessly at his side—"Useless—useless—the fatal snares are all set.

"For—none of her family dare decline this nomination to be Maid of Honor! It would be their united ruin—and—her doom would only be the nunnery! They will watch her as wolves wait to see the feeblest lamb of the flock fall!"

In his desperate mood, he came back to Xenia's daring suggestion! "I never could get her out of the country! My estates would be instantly confiscated! If I am ever to help her—she must disappear—disappear from their sight—*forever!*"

He left the chalet as the evening shadows were falling to urge Xenia to be first at the tryst, in the ravine behind the house where the loyal girl was even now gazing over the swelled current of the Dying Water.

In the gardens of the park, he was suddenly accosted by a ragged and starveling boy of fourteen, who fell upon his knees and begged for alms and work to drive away starvation.

Serge Dumont paused in surprise. "There is work for all our people—food enough for all,—why do you not go to the Intendant?"

The wretched starveling wrapped his rags around him.

"I am of Kharkov,—an orphan,—a stranger—and I walked down the valley of this river! I must have food and work or die!

"Let me work here in the garden—in the stables, Barin, anything—anything, for I am almost starving."

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The young noble's heart was touched. The funeral train was just returning from the final ceremonies at the grave—and already the crowd was pressing into the cottage of the departed, where the waiting feast was ready to cheer the exhausted faithful.

"Follow me," kindly said Serge, for Boursakoff was now hastening down the path. "Here is one of God's own poor, Nicolas," said the master. "Let this boy be well fed, find him a place in the village, and, then, send him to the gardener to work on the grounds and park! He is an orphan!" Even in his sorrow, Serge's heart was strangely softened.

The haggard eyed boy slavishly kissed the hand from which he had taken five roubles and followed on, in silence, as Serge and the Intendant closed their last interview before the hastened marriage.

"All the field force will be out at dawn, Barin," said Boursakoff. With God's favor we shall have great harvests,—for, we sow in mud! And, the stock is all in superb condition! It will be a great year!" His carriage stood waiting in the court to bear the priest and the bridegroom away.

"Go now, my right hand," cordially cried the master. "Bring the bride home to-morrow, and, mind that the pope comes to see me, for he has his wedding present and a case of wine waiting for him! Forget nothing of our plans to circumvent that brute Arcady." Boursakoff sprang away delighted.

In five minutes the priest and the eager lover were far away on the green steppe! Boursakoff had now a dozen hands making bright his spacious house for the young beauty Marika, who was to bring a harvest of happiness to the honest Intendant. It was the long-deferred crown of his humble happiness.

Under the evening stars, that night, with a beating heart, Magda Radovich was stealing away from her rendezvous with Xenia, when a tall form suddenly stood out of the shrubbery and advanced upon her!

With a slight scream, the timid girl halted as she recognized her uncle Arcady, bareheaded,—and with the white bandages still gleaming upon his wounded hand.

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The anxious Xenia had waited an hour before the light-footed beauty of the Dying Water stole down the glen, for Arcady—tortured and half crazed with the inflammation of his roughly dressed wound,—had taken to copious draughts of vodki, as a remedy.

And, sly, insinuating and prying, he had clung to his niece's side after the dinner, which was eaten in a moody silence.

The veteran roué was not deceived by the girl's apparent illness which had kept her from the glories of the Regimental Ball.

"She is as strong as a deer of the Urals,—the pert young minx," he mused, as he cautiously eyed her over his glass. "It is only her hatred of Milovitch that kept her away. I must post Lili—for the young one is growing as sly as her mother!" And—the strange fleeting look of happiness which had been reflected in her lovely face from her glowing heart astonished him!

"What the devil is she up to?" he muttered. One rash guess alarmed him! "Had she formed any attachment while at the Catherine Institute?"

For, even there, the gilded youth find means to steal into the hearts of the unfolding rosebuds of Russia. "Although they enter not," there are many keys in which frolic Love laughs at locksmiths. This would be a fatal blow to the family fortunes—and—Arcady trembled in rage.

With a sullen slyness, he had strolled off alone to the "tabagie." There was no one to gamble with,—he feared to drink more,—and he moodily smoked while he resented the curt avoidance of his spirited niece, who now disdained all his interference.

By an unhappy hazard,—he had seen the gleam of a white dress from his window, and, stealthily following, had from the bushes witnessed the long colloquy of Magda with the impassioned Xenia.

It was easy to see that the two were in an earnest conversation, and, Arcady promptly decided to intercept the woman who was at his niece's side.

But, to his surprise, when they parted, the woman disappeared in the direction of their own village, and

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the crippled man could never have kept up with the swinging stride of Xenia, now magnificent in her bodily vigor and grace. She fled away—a gliding goddess.

With a growl, Arcady accosted his niece. "Fine doings—you young minx!" he babbled. "I will have something to say to your brother when he comes! Stealing out at night to consort with low peasant fortune tellers—with dames who sell charms and love potions,—with strolling hussies." The insult was brutal.

Magda drew her breath in one convulsive gasp, of relief, for she saw that her beloved secret was safe—though she knew now, that she was in danger of being followed.

With a swift side step,—she passed him and then fled away to the house, but not before she had faced him to say, in a voice which cut the coward with its cold sneer, "You brute! You shall answer to my brother when he comes for this insult! Let me pass!" And, he was awed by her resolute attack, awed to a stupid silence!

She clasped her hands upon her heaving bosom and fled away to the safety of her own rooms, there to weep over the letter which brought to her the news of her brilliant doom at court! "I will never go to Kief," the loving girl cried, "and, I will never wear a Maid of Honor's sash!"

She sat long in her lonely room, the splendors of her loosened hair falling around her exquisite shoulders! In rapid review, she passed over all the story of the fiery-hearted Xenia! She was stunned by the suddenness of the news which exposed to her the cold merchandising of her youth and virginal freshness to advance the ambitious plans of General Radovich.

She shuddered, and buried her face in her hands.

Even in the guarded retreat of the Catherine Institute, she had heard stories of the gilded miseries of the beautiful women who are the broken-hearted lay figures of the wild Court on the icy Neva.

"Never! Never!" she cried, as she gazed out toward the great chateau of Khaminavatka, where one light burned in her loyal lover's room.

The sudden passion of her heart had brought all the

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womanhood in her nature into flower! Fearing nothing —Russian like, she trusted to no one, now!

Behind the invitation of Prince and Princess Youresief, she saw the game of the ambitious Vera Orbeleff! The confidences of years were not lost upon her!

From the chatter of brilliant court society butterflies, visiting their younger sisters, she had caught a glimpse of the game in which Andrè Radovich, the Czar's Aide de Camp, was pushing the Princess Vera forward to dominate the easy-going Minister of War!

A loving woman's jealousy suddenly sprang to life! "She shall know nothing—nothing! I see her artful plans! Serge is the handsomest, richest, most powerful noble of the Kherson! I am to be disposed of at Court! The General will use my father as a cat's-paw to enrich himself.

"After the contracts are secured, after I am out of the way, Andrè Radovich will need the Princess no longer! And—she—would see me doomed to an official marriage with a Grand Duke's complaisant Aide de Camp,—for, then—the way is clear!

"She will visit him, he will be lonely and desolate—and then Vera Orbeleff will reign at Khaminavatka! I will seal my lips—lock my heart, and, they shall never drag me to court!"

The desperate girl dreamed of her relatives upon the Danube, of a fond old godfather, an Austrian ambassador.

She sat musing for an hour, while from the halls below resounded Arcady's drunken yells as he bullied the frightened servants into bringing him floods of vodki to further inflame his raw wound.

Suddenly she sprang up. "I have it! I will not go to Kief—I must make a plan. Serge shall give me money! I can steal away to Wosnescenk,—and take the boat to Odessa,—by Nicolareff.

"A peasant's garb will do! Serge can get me a passport!

"They shall all think me dead! For, I will disappear—forever. And,—he can then come abroad and meet me! If he goes by Vienna, and I—to Constantinople, we can

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not be traced. And, then, he can marry me abroad! But, I must act before the Tsaritza names me, officially, else,—my disappearance, my disobedience of the Czarina's orders, would be his ruin!"

She now loathed her living prison under the eyes of Arcady Radovich! Xenia's quick wit had given her a cue for instant action.

Her lover was still dreaming of her at Khaminavatka, rapt in the love dreams awakened by the letter brought by Xenia, all unconscious of Arcady's spying,—when the young Baroness drove out of her gateway, taking the Bratskoe road, in the bright freshness of the morning.

Arcady Radovich's drunken sleep was over at noon.

When he staggered downstairs, his first demand was for his niece. "The Barina has gone to Bratskoe—to the General's villa—to meet the Barin and Barina! She will come home with them!" With an oath, the baffled spy sat down to continue his interrupted debauch.

Gazing across toward Khaminavatka, smiling out in the morning sunlight, he shook his fist with vows of vengeance. "If that devil's chicken Fedor, has only got into the garden workers, I will soon have every movement of yonder popinjay—and—he shall pay for lashing my poor fellows! Nothing but his blood, I want—nothing less—and Milovitch, crazy after Lili, shall be my executioner." He laughed viciously in his drunken conceit!

At that hour, Serge Dumont, walking his gardens and orchards, saw the half-starved stranger lad busied with the throng of weaker workers renovating the superb gardens! "They treat you kindly, my boy!" he said, as he passed along, leaving Arcady Radovich's youthful spy grinning and pulling his flaxen forelock. The youngster's crafty eyes dropped in shame.

Serge's own mind was seething in a storm of unsatisfied yearning, for while Magda had prudently made an after-midnight appointment in the grove where he had met her, to see Xenia for the last time,—she had absolutely refused to allow her lover to accompany the faithful woman. "If my parents return, I must wait till two o'clock, when the house is still, to steal out," she wrote

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"and I will give you the news of all the plans they make! For, if they take me away, Serge—you must follow me,—or else, I will die!"

While Serge Dumont waited the return of the village pope, with the Intendant and his pretty bride Marika,—the wife of the priest was astonished at an early morning visit from the beautiful young Baroness Magda.

With Love's artful dissembling, the intrepid girl moulded the simple woman as wax in her fair white hands.

She had learned at the villa, of the delay of one day in the arrival of the party of roysterers from Wosnescenk.

The General had sent a courier to bid his household prepare a breakfast on the morrow for their own party, and a half dozen of the merry officers of the famous Dragoon Regiment!

"One blessed day—one priceless day," thankfully cried Magda—as she drove out of the villa grounds, and wended to the priest's house. Too well she knew that Arcady would soon blunder down to Bratskoe on her trail, and so, she hastened to finish her work.

With affected surprise, she learned from the priest's wife of his visit to the meadow farms for the hasty nuptials of the Intendant and Marika.

"I will send you a carriage here," the young patrician cried. "Dress yourself at once, and drive over to Khaminavatka! Tell your husband to come home by our mansion with you,—after the wedding breakfast there! I wish him to cross over the ford and come to our house early this afternoon.

"For, I wish to make arrangements for my confession. I may go away soon!"

When the meek woman, with trembling haste, appeared ready to step into the carriage summoned by her servant, Magda Radovich handed her a little bundle.

"The first thing you are to do is to give this bundle to Xenia, the new housekeeper at the chateau. Let no one see it! Give it to her yourself!

"I have fifty roubles for you, when you come to me this afternoon. Drive with full speed—so, as to get there before your husband leaves! Tell Xenia it is from me—

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but,—silence to all,—even your husband—about this." And, the eager woman nodded, anxious to earn her fifty roubles.

And, then, with ostentatious deliberation, the young beauty drove around the little village, where the eager shopkeepers crowded around her carriage.

It was two o'clock when she descended from her carriage, at the mansion on the Dying Water, to find Arcady Radovich standing awaiting her, in the open door!

"I want the horses," he brutally cried,—but, without even a glance, the young beauty passed him by! Once in her own rooms, she seized her glasses.

"Victory!" she murmured, with a thankful heart, for across the dividing stream she could see the priest's carriage slowly moving down through the park, toward the ford, where no carriage had crossed in the long fifty years of the vendetta.

"Serge has my letter, now,—thank God!" she cried, as she burst into happy tears.

Serge Dumont was awaiting the Intendant and his bride, when Xenia, with flaming eyes, led him aside into the great drawing room! In a few words, she told him of Baroness Magda's daring ruse.

He tore the letter open—and then, grasped the happy woman by both her hands.

"To-night,—at two o'clock,—you are to be at the point of the woods! I will hide on the river bank—I will be well armed! Fear for nothing. While you wait—on watch,—we will have our only safe interview,—unless you can arrange—further—with the priest's wife! I will be at the chalêt—at two—and, we will go over together!"

"Not so! Barin!" cried Xenia, with kindling eyes. "You go down to the sheepfold at one o'clock and wait there. Then steal down to the bank and cross over below!

"I will cross here at the chateau and steal down through the fields! We can come back together—for if we should be followed—they will then only think the worst of me—and,—nothing whatever of you, but—we will meet there—at the point of the woods at two o'clock! I will guard her with my life! Come into the little

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ravine, and you will find us there! If our people should see you and I—they would never suspect the Barina!" she said, dropping her glances.

Serge pressed Xenia's hands in a mute acknowledgment of her keen wit, and then, turned away to meet the bridal couple who were driving into the court yard!

That night at three o'clock, the villagers were still feasting over the Intendant's wedding when Serge Dumont stole down to the bank of the Dying Water, after the long hour of ecstasy in which Magda Radovich had poured out her impassioned soul.

There, in the woods on the hostile shore, watched over by Xenia, the two lovers had sworn an eternal resistance to the contemplated bargain and sale of a woman's heart, soul and honor.

"You shall disappear, darling!" was Serge's last word! "But, only at the last! And, now, the next meeting must be at the priest's house! For, you shall not go to Kief." He knew of the fifty roubles which had sealed the woman's lips.

Once across the stream, Serge and Xenia wandered homeward through the park. They were both too exalted for speech—but, when they reached the chalêt, they sat down on the steps!

Suddenly, Xenia seized his arm. "My God! Barin! Look! Look! The villain has discovered the Barina's meeting with us!"

"All is lost!"—Serge Dumont groaned in his anguish, for—there—across the darkling stream—shone out one red light—from his beloved's window—and—as they gazed—there were two windows blazing with a dull red flame! "All is over!" cried Serge. "I must carry her off—now!"

"And—I will help you!"—cried Xenia at his side.

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CHAPTER VIII.

PRINCESS VERA'S VISIT.—DOWN THE RIVER.

Serge Dumont gazed at his companion in a helpless agony. "What is to be done now?" he cried in a hollow voice. "Of course, there will be a challenge—at once. I will send a courier in the morning for Prince Youresief! If I live through the duel—he may be able to obtain the Emperor's permission for our marriage—on the false grounds of necessity!

"Even General Radovich fears Youresief's power! I could tell him all the story of Pierre's mysterious death—and—he may frighten the whole lot off!

"I could give Arcady Radovich a small Polish estate—to quiet him—and—get him out of the Kherson—forever!"

For, he doubted not that Arcady had slyly followed his daring niece and observed the rencontre.

"Barin!" answered the quick-witted Xenia. "Let me go into Bratskoe in the morning to the priest's house. I will buy liberally for the chateau, and begin to go regularly there,—every morning. The priest is always asleep after his dominoes and quass,—unless it is a Sunday or feast day! I know the bravery of this dear girl!

"She will be the first to meet her parents! If she drives into the villa or the town, the Pope's wife will bring her to me—there, in her house. You can give me a liberal present for the Pope's wife, and I can easily say that I am going to take orders for the embroideries of our village girls—if any one becomes suspicious! Do nothing—only wait here—in your rooms—and the chalêt—till I come back! Then—you will know what has happened! You can strike at them, defend yourself, or else wait to help Magda as you will! I see it all coming! You must carry her off—but,—she must first disappear!"

"How,—how can it be done?" stammered the Manor Lord.

"Ah! Leave that to us two women! There is always

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a way for a woman to reach her lover—if she craves the sight of his face! We women are all alike! Even the peasant girl has a heart!"

Laying her firm white hand on his brow, she said "Sleep! I will come to you in the morning! One word more"—she said, with downcast eyes. "You have brought me here,—and made a lady of me against my will. I shall wear silk,—in your house.

"Let them all think what they will, of me! It will save Magda,—and—if I wander in the park with you,—late at night, veiled and dressed like a Barina—even the spies may think that you are only busied with me! It is all to save Magda!"

As she turned—Serge gazed at her in surprise. In truth, the ease and comfort of her new home,—the dress of her new station, had startlingly brought out that voluptuous womanly beauty which had astonished him, when he saw her in the artful undress of the Tzigane—a garb which reveals with insidious suggestion,—and hides nothing.

"She is fit to be the mother of heroes," muttered Serge —as he went to his private cabinet of arms, and selected his favorite weapons. "It is war to the death—now—open or secret—and,—that depends alone—on this drunken brute." He lifted a dueling pistol and tried the hair trigger.

"One touch would free me of this incubus—and, avenge Pierre! But,—it must not be"—he sighed, as he laid down the weapon—"not yet! I can not ruin her life! Youresief will be my mainstay—only—I must have certainty first—as to the danger signals." He paced the floor in a mad unrest until the gray dawn.

While he gazed with wolfish eyes across the stream, he saw that the two red lights still flamed from Magda's windows.

"Fool!" he cried, "I must answer"—and slipping a revolver in his pocket, he quickly glided down the corridor, and, ten minutes after,—a red glow illumined the front of the little chalêt!

"Thank God! She alone can see the answering signal!" he murmured, as he watched the windows darken

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where the woman he loved had caught the reply of his loving heart!

With a quick prudence, he then extinguished all the lights and sat on the porch of the little chalêt,—the night winds cooling his heated brow and listening to the passionate plaint of the nightingale in the budding forest.

The cool stream rippled by—and the peace of the brooding night entered his soul! He followed, in fancy, every footstep of the dauntless girl on her return to her deserted rooms.

They had arranged all their future plan of action,—the foundation of their future happiness being an absolute refusal of Magda to go to Kief,—and—her agreement to evade the acceptance of the Maid of Honor's nomination by a mysterious flight.

"Once that you are thought dead by them—I can follow you—and—then, when you are my wife—we can defy them all—but,—you shall never stir a step to Petersburg! For the Czar and Czarina might smile at a madcap love—but, never forgive a direct disobedience or desertion!"

While he had communed with Xenia, on their lingering way through the park,—they were dogged by an unseen spy after emerging from the foliage of the river.

With the speed of a swift Camilla, Baroness Magda fled homeward with a wildly beating heart! Every swift step was now a relief,—each tree safely passed, a new guarantee of her safety!

"Thank God!" she cried. "He is probably drunk—and,—I am safe!"

The gardens were safely traversed—and Magda glided into the darkened conservatory through a French window left unfastened.

She was now buoyant at heart, for she had arranged the safe plan of meeting Xenia, in the house of the priest, over which threshold the moujik never dared to tread unless bidden!

A smile curled her lip as she thought of her absolute safety there from Arcady's spying—for, the priest's wife indignantly resented the outcast noble's raids upon the defenseless peasant girls of their flock.

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Groping her way up the grand staircase, she passed her uncle's private rooms.

All was dark! The light-footed Peri paused a moment at the door! All was still. "I am safe!" she thankfully decided. "He sleeps!"

And—then she sprang lightly up the stair to her own corner rooms!

Alas! As she reached for the door she stumbled over the prostrate body of a man! Springing into her rooms, she quickly lit a taper—and was then confronted by the empurpled visage of Arcady Radovich!

His face was convulsed with a coarse grin of triumph, as he leered, "I have trapped you, at last—for you have been three hours away, with your lover! A midnight stroller! Fine doings for a Maid of Honor! I have blocked your little game, though, for, I have been on guard here since midnight! And—now—you shall reckon with Baroness Lili!"

With a quick gasp—the outraged girl pointed toward the door. "If you do not leave this room, I will take the carriage and go to General Radovich's villa at Bratskoe! Never dare to speak to me again!"

"Wait,—only wait!" growled Arcady as he slunk downstairs. There was that in the hard, defiant face of the young Baroness which made the vaurien tremble!

"I must not go too far," he muttered—"for we need her,—this winter at Petersburg. After that,—she may go to the devil—in her own way!"

His first thought had been to alarm the household, but, even he, knew how foreign to the Russian peasant is any social criticism of their masters.

But, groping his way downstairs to the vodki still standing on the little table where the "sacuska" was set out,—he saw a lad's form hovering under his window, and carefully tossing pebbles up at his casement.

In a moment, Arcady stood by his side! It was the beggar orphan lad who now dishonored Pierre Dumont's bounty. "The stranger within the gates!"

"Speak!" cried Arcady drawing him into a secure corner. "They watch me close"—babbled the boy—"but, I have been every night, in the garden! And,—the great

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Barin goes to the summer house. He was out half the night in the park, with the handsome woman who is the new housekeeper,—the one they call Xenia! They were hidden out in the woods together two hours to-night, and—then went into the chalêt together. I have often seen them together in the garden—at night!" Arcady muttered a curse. "Does he soon go away?"

The frightened boy muttered "No!" Every one is working like mad,—in the fields,—and park and gardens, —and,—he is only free at night! The Intendant was married to-day to the girl from the meadow farms—and, there is great feasting, to-morrow."

Arcady held out a ten-rouble note to the boy. "Get you gone! Watch him like a wolf! And—come to me here—when you can! If I go away—you are to stay on —and—I'll learn all from you when I come back!" The lad sped away as the drunkard gave him a rough shake.

"So!" the plotter growled—"Serge has taken up with the handsome jade Xenia! Well fed—well dressed—lively with wine,—she can fairly well play the lady of Khaminavatka—for,—women are all alike."

With a sense of mortified defeat, Arcady slunk upstairs, after draining the vodki bottle. "What the devil is she up to now?" he growled. "It may be some madcap young officer from the nearest camps! I've known a man to ride a hundred versts to spend an hour with a woman at the risk of his life—but—Lili will end all this in short order. Kief first,—then to Petersburg—and—when Princess Vera comes, she will bell this young cat!"

A well-defined purpose to ride down the road next morning and meet the flinty-hearted mother developed in his mind, as he threw himself down to sleep!

Above him, on her knees, before the sacred icon, Magda Radovich had sworn an oath to die before Fate should tear her from Serge Dumont's arms. "His wife, or else—no man's,—so help me God, and Our Lady of Kazan!" she swore, kissing the cross.

By a strange bit of good fortune, Magda Radovich enjoyed peace on the sunny morrow, for Baron Arcady, at dawn, calling for a sulky à l'Americaine,—had furiously

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driven southwest across the steppe to intercept the returning family party.

And, then, as the day progressed, the young patrician girl arrayed herself and drove into Bratskoe, where she was hidden two hours in the priest's house before Colonel Milovitch piloted the great English brake, into the splendid grounds of the General's villa.

There was a steely glare in Baroness Lili's eyes when she found her carriage waiting and, learned that her daughter was busied in making purchases in the little city.

While the feast was being set, the revengeful Arcady drew his sister-in-law away into a recess of the flowering garden, and poured out his tale of mistaken accusations!

"You have done well, Arcady," she whispered. "I will have a sharp reckoning with her! She goes from Kief to Bobrinetz,—then back here,—with the Princess—and, afterwards direct to St. Petersburg. I know that she is an unruly little devil—grown a stranger to me—in the twelve years spent at the Institute. I can manage her, though—and—as for your stories of her having a lover—you've been drinking, that's all! She may ramble around,—she is romantic,—but,—you are a brute yourself—and, you think the worst of every one! I know my daughter!" she cried with a strange pride.

"Look here, my lady!" growled Arcady. "I want some money. I have had my hand hurt! I will go up to Kief ahead of you! And,—by the way,—put a veil over your devilment with Milovitch,—the girl half suspects!"

"That for all her bread and butter suspicions!" cried Baroness Lili snapping her fingers. "I'll go and get you five hundred roubles of General Andrè. Clear out for Kief,—and—meet us there,—and,—keep yourself sober,—and, out of quarrels.

"Milovitch and myself will take care of you up there. We shall stay two months—and I will get rid of Missy by sending her over in four weeks to the Youresiefs.

"Princess Vera will watch her there like a cat! I would rather have you away—when I break her in! Her

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fiery temper must be brought under—or—else our whole winter campaign is gone!

"The General will get Milovitch soon ordered up to the War Department on special duty. I will, of course, go to Petersburg—and—you and Alexandre can hold on here—and, look out for the horse contracts!"

She glided away with an ominous shake of her gown and left Arcady muttering, "A pretty programme—you black-hearted devil! I am to be left—a mere drudge! Never,—I will have my share of the fun!"

The feast was half done when Baroness Magda silently entered the room. With a warm greeting to her father and General Andrè, the pale-faced girl ignored Colonel Milovitch, effusive in his politeness, and stared calmly in a grim silence at the disgruntled Arcady.

To her mother, she offered a passive cheek, and then, took her seat without a word. Her heart was beating in a wild happiness, for, already Xenia was half way back to Khaminavatka bearing the full tidings of her own overcharged heart to the expectant Serge.

Magda smiled when she saw a well-armed Cossack escorting the housekeeper's carriage, for Arcady's sly plots had been all too evident.

The peasants on the road stared in amazement to see Xenia,—the discarded wife of a humble station keeper, dressed in a silk gown—and—riding in a carriage.

"It is the old way," murmured an envious tongue. "She is good-looking—the young Barin has no wife—and,—she will queen it for a season or two, till a new face shines her down!"

It had been the order of Excellence Serge Dumont that the carriage should be well escorted! "That murderous dog might fancy to assault her. I'll send a platoon of Cossacks, if they lift a finger," he growled—for—expectant of the duel, he had his fighting boots on.

The family circle at the Bratskoe villa was a constrained one, and Baron Alexandre, sullen and wearied was glad to accept his daughter's proposal that they should drive home, and leave the others to return in the evening.

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There were lambent flashes in Baroness Lili's eyes as she saw her daughter quietly play into her hand!

"The little devil does suspect! She needs a good clipping of her claws,—and—she shall have it!"

On the way home, glad to escape from the shouts and laughter of the convives, Baron Alexandre dejectedly conversed with his favorite child! It smote the proud girl's heart to see the wasted temples, the thinned hairs,—the careworn brow,—the lack-luster eyes, and the gray locks of a man who began life—with as fair prospects as any noble of the Kherson!

In an impulse, she leaned over to him. "Father! Father," she cried—"let us leave the steppe forever—you are only breaking your heart here!"

"My child," answered the dejected man, "I am helpless in Andrè's hands,—I am in debt, I depend on these contracts to keep a roof over our head! Where would we go? Of course, you will go to the Court—with your mother"—he bowed his head in his hands, and sobbed like a child.

And, then the young girl tenderly cheered him, though she hid in her own heart the discovery of the wretched unhappiness which had grown up in the twelve years of her absence, and the ominous scripture words came back to her, "A house divided against itself shall fall!"

She was glad to flee away to her rooms and await the coming encounter with her mother—a first trial of strength,—which she well knew was inevitable! She longed to be far away,—far over the borders of Russia,—with Serge in some unknown land, where even the chill blasts of winter would be welcome, for they would bring her there, peace and freedom—and fan the burning love in her womanly heart!

She had put away all her thoughtless girlhood in these last months, and, a strong, earnest womanhood now buoyed her up to face the coming clouds gathering over the lonely mansion on the Dying Water.

To cheer her lover that night, she flashed a white light from her windows, as arranged with Xenia, and, to her inexpressible joy,—saw the clear answering gleam of bright radiance from the summer house which told her

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that her lover was there, in the now hallowed room—thinking of her—and,—loyal to the death.

The village of Khaminavatka was lit up with the feasting which followed the bringing home of the Intendant's bride—and the joyous peasants were enjoying all the luxuries which Serge had poured out in honor of his faithful henchman! Boursakoff had posted all the guards on duty, and, secure in his happiness, did not regret the informal marriage!

For, the interminable ceremonies of the Russian middle class wedding,—the Tsyatsky,—the ladies of honor,—the groomsmen Schafers,—the Boyarin icon bearer, and all the drawn-out mummeries, were wanting.

Only—bright-eyed Marika—at the feast in the chateau spread in her honor, blushed and solemnly pledged her gentle and loyal heart, to the service of the Lord of Khaminavatka. It was a graceful reënforcement.

The Baroness Magda, with an unfaltering step, answered her mother's summons on the morrow, after the General,—the Baron,—Colonel Milovitch and Arcady were all off on a hare hunt! She knew now that her wild uncle was to depart for Kief at once, and so, she was ready to do battle, single handed. And, with no fear at heart, she faced it!

In her coign of vantage, Baroness Lili, clad in an easy fitting oriental robe de chambre,—cigarette in hand,—lolled back upon her divan as she deliberately unloosed the vials of wrath, upon the girl who stood there, pale and trembling before her.

Magda listened for a half an hour to the bitter tirade,—and, with compressed lips awaited in silence, the conclusion of her mother's vituperation!

The champagne of the evening before had left its mark in Baroness Lili's shaken nerves.

When she had finished, in a breathless exhaustion, she sharply demanded, "What have you to say?" The prospective Maid of Honor calmly faced her mother.

"Nothing! But—that Arcady is a drunkard and a liar! You have told me his story! I scorn to answer it! But, I shall have the protection of my father and uncle—for you have built up a wall to-day between our hearts! I

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am your daughter, no longer! You have killed my love!"

As she turned to leave the room, Baroness Lili caught the girl's wrists and dragged her back from the door!

"You will go to Kief,—pack, and prepare! You will go then to Bobrinetz to thank the Youresiefs for your nomination as Maid of Honor! Princess Vera will guard you till you go to Petersburg! Look that you obey me!"

"I will not go to Kief!" resolutely cried Magda—wrenching herself free. "This is my home,—my birthplace! I am a free noble! I have my own passport! I will appeal to Youresief—to the Czarina—who protects all the girls of the Institute!

"I have received no official nomination as Maid of Honor, and—I will not go to Bobrinetz to thank Prince Youresief, for what I have not received!

"I know your plans for my bargain and sale! I have listened to Arcady's drunken babblings! I am to be a poor pawn played off by the General in his money schemes!"

With a malignant look of rage,—the angered mother screamed—"It is then true! Girl! You have a lover here,—and you shall leave if I must drag you to the carriage."

Then, Magda Radovich grew as cold as ice! She faced her mother with an awful look in her accusing eyes. "I will throw myself into the Dying Water, before I stir a step!

"Do you want me to ask General Radovich whose lover this murderous brute Milovitch is? Must he tell me why you go to Kief? Shall I tell my half-crazed father what every peasant knows,—that Colonel Milovitch seeks to dishonor his house?"

When Lili Radovich raised her eyes, her daughter was gone, and the echo of her foot on the stair sounded ghostly and hollow.

With a muttered curse, the stricken woman turned to her glass.

Her face shone out ghastly and yellow there in the unflattering truth of the steely reflections!

She threw herself upon her divan, and, like a tiger

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whose spring has failed, waited for her prey to come once more within her clutch.

The merry hunting party returned. There was feasting in the hall, but no one but Magda's maid crossed the threshold of her door!

Arcady Radovich stole away like a thief in the night to the delights of Kief,—fingering his five hundred roubles, after a long conference with Milovitch, whose brows blackened at the mention of Serge Dumont's name. "Wait till we meet him together! We will have him à la barrierè, in twenty-four hours! He is a dead man!"

Milovitch was wolfish, for his mistress was in a whirlwind of defeated rage! Her every summons,—her beating on the door,—the vain intercession of her weak-minded husband,—all had failed to open the door of the room where the true-hearted girl bade defiance to the woman who had at last thrown off the mask!

It was after a stormy conference of three hours that General Andrè brought his fist down on the table with a resounding crash.

Colonel Milovitch had returned to the villa to await the fashionable pilgrims to Kief—and, the unhappy family was left alone with the beautiful rebel.

The dragoon was not loth to leave the scene of the bitter social battle, for the artful Arcady had informed him of the defiant attitude of the young Baroness!

"She is capable of anything"—growled Arcady—"and, Lili may drive her too far!"

"I'll leave the two women to fight it out," slowly said Milovitch, with an ominous leer.

"I only want one of them. In fact, I would rather the youngster did not go to Kief—for a led sheep is a poor companion on a two months' frolic!"

He salved his conscience by a liberal loan to the greedy Arcady, and—merrily rode away to the enjoyments of the Bratskoe villa.

The three seniors of the Radovich clan were left alone in the great dining room shaded by the lindens and willows which straggled along the sides of the neglected mansion. It was, as a last resort, that General Andrè was appealed to by the now secretly frightened Baroness

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Lili. Magda's father, for once, preserved an ominous silence.

"There is but one thing to do, my friends," calmly said the worldly wise General. "Let me take Magda over to the villa and leave her there in our absence with Olga Cherikoff! The dear old woman loves Magda—and she will be safe there until we have finished our visit at Kief!

"It is useless to force Magda into submission, and—madness to drive her into an open rebellion!

"You both owe me money"—the rich man ominously said, knocking off the ash of his cigarette, and contemplating his well-kept hands gleaming with diamond and sapphire rings.

"You want your contracts, Alexandre—you want your Petersburg winter, Lili, and I want my money—and, the key to the whole, is to have Magda accept this Maid of Honor's place!

"We all need Youresief's influence, in the contracts, and—every day—to counteract the influence of these Dumonts. Old Barbe Federoff is a witch, this young Major Serge is no fool,—and we have had a clear intimation from the Marechale de Noblesse to drop the quarrel.

"Now, on one condition only I will placate Magda—take her away to my villa—and win her over to meet Princess Vera, with open arms!

"If the child does not go to Bobrinetz,—then—Vera Orbeleff can come down here, at once, visit at the villa, and cajole Magda into going up there—later! You have tried force and abuse, Lili! It has signally failed! Let me try kindness! The girl is our trump card at Petersburg.

"The Minister of War—is Vera Orbeleff's slave—the Grand Dukes will notice Magda—our fortune is made! But—once drive her to madness all fails—and all falls!

"Hear me now! Arcady—the worthless devil, is to let Magda alone! And—you, too, Lili, for once, hold your hand off! I will not back up your ménage anv more, unless you obey me! Where do you want the girl to go? Out on the steppe?"

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He rose and left the husband and wife gazing at each other in a trembling fear of the clouds of poverty. They were forced to do his stern bidding!

For once, Lili Radovich purred and flattered her startled helpmeet into a gentler mood, while she waited the result of General Radovich's embassy.

With a stately courtesy, the old soldier sent an affectionate note requesting an interview with the young rebel, now entrenched within the invulnerable walls of her own room!

For a half an hour, the murmur of earnest voices sounded within the apartment, while Baroness Lili, on tiptoe, waited eagerly in the hall.

The guilty mother's cheeks were aflame as the General suddenly emerged, and caught her in her hovering spy maneuvers.

His martial face hardened—as he followed his sister-in-law down the long hall. Drawing her into a vacant guest room, he proceeded to give Milovitch's inamorata a mauvais quart d'heure.

As he lit a cigarette, he said drily—"Lili! You can not disgrace yourself any further than you have done! Nay,—no words! If it were not Milovitch, it would be another!

"Do you wish me to call the roll of your lovers? I have now succeeded in taking the whole affair off your hands! Magda will drive over to Bratskoe with me—and,—remain there till you have gone to Kief.

"She demands perfect liberty to come here with Madame Cherikoff, whom I can trust! She absolutely stipulates that she shall not meet Arcady or Colonel Milovitch, and—she will await my return with Princess Vera—and then—consider the question of a visit to Bobrinetz to see the Youresiefs.

"On these conditions, alone, I have been able to persuade her not to openly refuse the Maid of Honor nomination!

"But, look to yourself—and let her alone!

"For, by God, she swears that she will, if further outraged, appeal to Prince Youresief and, then, to the Tzaritza herself for protection! You—you—and Arcady

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—to charge her with having a lover! What bestiality!"

The humbled woman crept away to hide her shame—and—that night, Magda Radovich sobbed out her sorrows in the arms of the motherly old Olga Cherikoff.

There was an awkward tête-à-tête at the mansion on the Dying Water, where Colonel Milovitch had at once returned to join the party for Kief—for once, the heavy dragoon found the wild hearted Lili, subdued and abashed before the lowering glances of her unhappy husband.

But, around the red lamp in Madame Cherikoff's boudoir, there was love and peace!

The widow of an officer killed in an unhappy duel,—motherly and single-hearted,—with silvered hair and gentle winning eyes,—the old-fashioned Russian lady held the girl's aching head upon her breast, and wisely asking nothing, comforted the stray lamb which had wandered into her fold.

General Andrè Radovich smoked unnumbered cigarettes under his blossoming lime trees and apostrophized the stars.

"It is a hard, wild life—this fierce life of the steppe—and,—they shall not brutalize that poor child any longer! I will crush Lili"—as he hurled down his cigarette, ground it into the gravel with his armed heel—and, then, clanked off to his lonely lair.

For once—the reckless social whirl of the disorganized family palled upon him! "She is the only decent one in the whole clan—this brave girl,—and,—I would respect Alexandre if he blew out that brute Milovitch's brains. As for Arcady—I will take him in hand! The girl shall have peace!"

He slept to dream of all the schemes upon the Neva which now depended upon the occultation of the brilliant Day Star near the Czar's throne. And, his will ruled the whole sullen clan by fear and greed.

A week later, Madame la Baronne Lili Radovich became the bright particular star of the very gayest circles of Kief.

Notwithstanding her entourage of the brilliant officers of the Twelfth Army Corps,—the reckless woman was

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sorely troubled at heart. For her defeat by her revolted daughter was a Waterloo!

When the family party had paused at the Bratskoe villa to take up General Radovich's suite, Magda had resolutely refused to see her mother! "She knows the reason! Ask her!" was the firm response of the indignant girl to her startled uncle.

It was not all peace in the coterie now settled pro tem, in the Jerusalem of Russia, though the loungers at the Hôtel de Noblesse crowded Madame Radovich's box at the theatre, and ardent cavaliers escorted her to the merrymakings on the picturesque banks of the Dnueper.

For, General Radovich had hastened away to Moscow, after telegraphing to the Princess Vera to meet him there at once.

The sullen Baron Alexandre was soon engaged in a pilgrimage of all the historic churches and in renewing his old friendships with the haughty clergy and the high officers of the Twelfth Army Corps.

Arcady was already in a state of dissipated eclipse, for the five hundred roubles bore him bravely up. But, there had been a violent scène between Lili Radovich and her black-browed lover.

On the third day after their arrival, Michel Milovitch had driven her alone down the leafy Boulevard Bibikovsky. "Either you or that drunken ape Arcady has brought me to the verge of ruin!" he growled, when they were far away from curious eyes. "Who babbled, I know not! I care not! But, last night I was summoned to a private conference at the hôtel de Noblesse, with Prince Youresief who has been here, incognito, for a day.

"He has been closeted with General Andrè, and, now threatens to withdraw your daughter's nomination as Maid of Honor—and even to send Arcady as a common soldier to the Caucasus.

"He had the whole story of the trap, which we laid for that popinjay Dumont, at Wosnescenk! Only, you—and Arcady and I, knew of that scheme!" Who had

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betrayed the others! The heavy dragoon was coarsely abusive!

Notwithstanding he was deep in a scheme to order the remount of his regiment through the hoodwinked husband,—and the General, the Baron and himself would divide a hundred thousand roubles,—if the contracts were duly approved,—he burned under the fierce denunciation of Prince Youresief. For, he was both brave and rash.

The old Marechale de Noblesse had heard ugly stories of the strangely unexplained death of his predecessor, Excellence Pierre Dumont. There was no one to benefit by the taking off of Serge Dumont, now, but the Radovich clan! Prince Youresief had not spared General Radovich in their long colloquy before Colonel Milovitch had been called up to receive his quietus.

"I do not suspect you, Andrè," said the irate Prince to his old brother in arms. "But,—Arcady is capable of anything! Alexandre is a nonentity—and, his wife a termagant! It is she who has fomented this quarrel of years, and—I know why! Simply because Pierre Dumont would not let her reign over Khaminavatka as his âme damnée!

"Now, General, I have absolute orders to end this feud! Look to it! If differences arise, let the law attend to the property matters,—appeal to me, in all other affairs! For, by God, I will pack Arcady off to the Caucasus, and his name will be struck off the list of the noblesse! I will attend to Milovitch—fear will hold back his trigger finger!

"The slightest scandal on Baroness Lili's part will cancel her daughter's nomination, and as for Baron Alexandre,—he will be deprived of any future government dealings!

"Now, sir, you hold the future of your family in your hands! I shall notify Serge Dumont to shoot down like a dog anyone who affronts him, or trespasses on his privacy! You are now warned—and—remember, I have orders from the Czar's Private Cabinet to quell this feud!

"For, never ask me where I got the news of this

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bloody massacre contemplated—or how I have learned that Pierre Dumont paid for his unhappy election with his life! You are held by the Czar responsible now to end this feud! Keep the peace on the Dying Water! Look at this letter!

"A truthful response to it would take these imperial eagles off your shoulders! You would be an aide de camp of the Czar no longer than the receipt of my letter! Send me this dangling dragoon now—and—a last word with you—Baroness Lili must vary her favors—or return to the retirement of her steppe home! There she has only her purblind husband to hoodwink!"

And, with an ashen face, Andrè Radovich had left the presence of the loyal old noble who had learned at Wosnescenk of the deliberate plan of the two swash bucklers to entrap Serge in a hasty duel, without a friend at his back!

For, Arcady's brutal menaces had been spread far and wide—and—Milovitch had a gloomy record behind him, of fatal brawls.

No man ever knew the whip lash words with which the knightly Gregory Youresief scourged Colonel Michel Milovitch! "I have my eye on you," the old veteran fiercely said. "One crooked turn of your malignant deviltry, and the Commander of the Army Corps shall summon a Court of Honor. I will be the responsible witness! Your road lies, with a shaved forehead, to Siberia, as a degraded and broken officer—and—there—you may receive a return, in kind, from the men whom you have brutalized in your long career. They are not apt to be merciful!"

As the shrinking wretch cowered before the angry Marechale de Noblesse—Youresief calmly concluded, "Flaunt Alexandre Radovich's dishonor no longer before the faces of your brother officers! Take heed! Even a mari complaisant may turn upon you!

"She may select a younger,—a handsomer,—a richer,—and—a more discreet lover! Begone! And—know that I have ordered the Inspector to keep an eye on you—and—your dealings!

"If you want the satisfaction of a gentleman, I will

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dignify you by that name for just twenty-four hours, until I leave! You know how to get it!"

And so it fell out that Lili Radovich had reaped a rich harvest in kind for the abuse of her defiant daughter, from the burly lover who had cringed like a cur before Youresief's fiery anger.

The Baroness, always sure of her slave, sent him away placated after a bitter quarrel to meet Arcady Radovich in a recrimination which made the vaurien desperate.

But, Lili Radovich—for the first time in her life—cowered before a man, when the General gave her his parting orders. "You are on the brink of ruin! Family ruin, public disgrace! See to it that you write to Olga Cherikoff and have her soften down your child's resentment!

"Let Magda absolutely alone! I go to Moscow to bring the one woman here who can smooth over this juncture! You know as well as I, that once,—at St. Petersburg—in the Court,—Magda's youthful spirits and awakened vanity, her love of pleasures yet to be known for the first time, will awaken her unfolding heart! Leave it to her—to float with the stream!

"One more quarrel—and—you are ruined forever! I shall bring Vera Orbeleff back with me—I shall keep Magda at Bratskoe—where Michel Milovitch shall never set his foot—while the child is there.

"As for Arcady, its a choice with him now, between starvation and a chain—or, my bounty! And—the last injunction, if you must play Catherine II,—veil yourself here—and,—wait till you return to your own home! There you have only the gray ravens of the steppes as witness, for your moujiks are all blind dolts! If Magda calls for my protection,—she leaves your roof forever!" There was no mistaking the old General's mood—it was an unforgiving one.

The days dragged along at Kief, while General Radovich posted night and day, the nine hundred and fifty versts to Moscow. He had not owned to his family clan, the fears which shook his own bosom! One word from Prince Youresief—and,—he would be disgraced before all Russia.

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"Vera—Vera," he sighed, "My last resort—my only hope! If she can not softly master this girl with insinuating kindness, then,—my court career is closed!"

Madame la Baronne Lili Radovich resplendent at the theatre de a Ville—the theatre Zétov,—and the Chateau des Fleurs,—wisely selected an entourage from the younger patrician officers of the swarming Headquarters, and smilingly nodded to Milovitch, at the Jardin des Eaux, and the Hermitage, while her subjugated lover raged in a mad jealousy.

The concerts,—promenade militaires,—the dainty breakfasts,—grand dinners, and jolly little suppers gave her a chance to judiciously vary her favors, and,—with a secret glee,—the reckless woman demurely dropped her eyes, as she insisted to the pleading Colonel, that her changed social deportment was "for their joint safety."

But, under the budding roses of the villa at Bratskoe, Magda, the true hearted, now walked, with freshened beauty mantling her fair cheeks.

Secure in her uncle's protection, cheered and soothed by the motherly old widow's love, she carried in her heart a new hope,—the postponement of all effort to force her to the Neva as a court butterfly.

Free in her movements, relieved from espionage, she had hastened to the home of the village priest, on the morning after the departure of her family.

There, Xenia was already awaiting her, and as the days glided on,—there were many hours of stolen happiness.

Her ardent lover, by varied visits, morning, noon or night, found his way to the cottage of the pope,—when that functionary was absent upon his parochial work, and, by hazard, Xenia was always there to busy the good housewife with her traffic in embroideries, or the continued pretexts invented by her fertile brain.

It was a month after the departure of all her family jailers when Magda Radovich received a letter which brought the blood leaping to her heart in a quick flood!

The General and Princess Vera Orbeleff were now posting down from Kief to Bratskoe, and—the wily old uncle begged his niece to prepare for the visit to the

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Youresiefs, conducted by the winsome court beauty!

Magda awoke from a dream of eternal happiness with a start!

It was now the witching month of Love and the romance of the steppe was breathed in every unfolding flower—in every bursting blossom! The ardent girl had plied every gentle art upon her indulgent old duenna.

In the soft summer evenings she had often driven alone over to her deserted home, and, now, mindful of the spies whom she feared might have been left by the revengeful Arcady, she had learned the way to cross the Dying Water, in her own little boat, anchored by the shore in the great pool.

Always alone,—stealing into the now impenetrable shades of the park of Khaminavatka,—she had passed many happy hours in the little chalet, where her lover was ever battling with the problem of forcing a marriage before the fatal nomination to the Court circle should put them both out of the pale of the clemency of the Imperial consorts.

The dark clouds still lingered over them, for ruin to one or both—confiscation of property,—loss of rank or a re-opening of the bitter feud, to end in blood,—faced the devoted pair at every turn.

"Serge, Serge!" cried Magda, "You must find the way! For, the Court means our lifelong separation—and—life under my mother's roof is now impossible! My refusal of the nomination would lose me my last friend, the General—and,—if you confide in Youresief—you lose the only man who could gain the Czar's clemency! We are doomed—and—there is but one pathway open—flight—or my disappearance!"

As those happy days flew by, the brief respite from dogging spies, Magda and Xenia studied long in secret over the plan of a disappearance which should leave Serge frankly free to deny all knowledge of the whereabouts of the Day Star! Their meetings were held in the house of the village pope—on Xenia's tri-weekly visits to Bratskoe.

And—late—at night,—in the darkest recesses of the shaded park, Serge Dumont wandered with Xenia, who

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had with marvelous energy taken up the discipline of the great chateau.

The happy Boursakoff with three hundred laborers had sown the great crops of wheat, millet, rape seed, buckwheat,—and the fields were now alive with hundreds of peasants.

The orchards, gardens and plantations, as well as the stately park, were all now in superb order—the incense breath of bursting blossoms was filling the balmy air!

It was after a long conference with the young Baroness, now made desperate by Magda's news of the arrival of the General and the all conquering Princess Vera, that Serge parted moodily with Xenia, in the park at midnight, after the faithful woman had followed Magda to the farther shore, returning by a different path!

His heart was wrung by Magda's wailing cry. "This is the last night—we must trust to God alone, now! They come to-morrow—and,—no one can outwit Princess Vera."

Both the lovers realized a change of plan, and each feared the jealous treachery of the two who were urging on the gilded exile of the now betrothed girl!

"Tell me, Xenia," cried Serge. "I must depend on you—for you alone can meet her now. Is there no way? Where is your woman wit?"

The ardent woman turned and faced him under a darkened clump of oaks, elms, walnuts and maples, the shaded heart of the park—now throbbing with summer's witchery!

For, in the magic South Russian summer they could almost hear the quickening growth of the waving wheat,—a foot high,—stretching far away in an emerald band,—scores of miles broad—and a hundred miles long.

"It will come to my plan at last! Hide her away, Barin! For God's sake, listen, before you lose her forever! I know how hard the Russian heart is!"

Her sobs mingled with Serge Dumont's sighs as he turned away alone, from his last tryst—and sought the chateau, alone in despair.

The Intendant's bell had tolled midnight, and the unhappy lover mounted to the roof of the chateau to gaze

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upon the light which showed him that his dauntless fiancée was safe, at home—awaiting the morning for her return to face the wily visitors.

He wandered into the upper corridor, after flashing a return signal across the stream, and entering the deserted upper rooms, opened the secret door, and by some impulse, wandered into the hidden eastern chambers!

Love had led his feet there, and, upon the dust-covered floors, his steps sadly marked the requiem of his hopes.

"If they take her from me, I shall kill myself," he swore, as he gazed at the walls whence he had removed the crumbling picture of the lovely woman of the past, whose gracious presence seemed to be with him again, to-night!

The candle fell from his hand as a woman glided to his side! "Come! Come!" cried Xenia, gazing around in surprise at the secret haunt. "I followed you here, by the light! I have found a dangerous traitor—and, we may be betrayed at once to those wretches at Kief."

Serge Dumont dragged the excited woman through the opening, closed the false door and locked the covering armoire. "On your life, tell no one of these rooms! No living soul knows but you and I!" The woman bowed her head in a silent oath! "Now, your news?" he demanded, as they faced each other in the lonely abandoned guest chamber. "I was coming back through the park when I became conscious that I was being followed! I glided along to where I could get a view in a starlit opening—and saw a lad stealing along after me.

"I then dallied until I could make sure of him.

"With a few springs, I was soon upon him, and—I tied his hands with my veil! He whimpered and I have locked him in the ice room below! Come down to him! Kill him," gasped the desperate woman. "Then, no one will ever know! For, his lying tongue may lose you the Day Star! And, I warn you—Barin—you may find Magda any day floating dead in the Mertvovod!

"Are you a man—to let her be dragged away to a gilded shame—a death, by inches! Let me hide her for you! They will never find her!"

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"Peace, you rave!" cried Serge, striding along in search of the culprit! When the two stood side by side, facing the cowering young scoundrel, Serge Dumont started back.

"The orphan boy from Kharkov!" he muttered, and then—all the villainous treachery flashed upon him.

Drawing a pistol from his pocket, he suddenly clapped it to the young wretch's ear! "Who set you on to follow me?" demanded the nobleman, in a voice as cutting as the icy blast! Quick—answer—or I'll scatter your brains! The truth!"

Groveling at his feet, the young spy faltered. "Arcady Radovich!" "And—you have often seen him?" The muzzle was pressed closer.

"Once only, Barin!" howled the youth. "When?" "A month and a half ago, when you commenced to make love to this lady—and to walk in the park at night! I crossed the river and then told him about your meeting her in the summer house and the park at night!" "And, to-night?" Serge queried. "I followed you and her in the garden—but, I was afraid to come too near!"

"Brute!" cried Serge, spurning him with his foot. "Get up and follow me!"

The three mounted the stairway to Serge Dumont's superb state chambers. "Go over, Xenia!" cried her master, "to the stables. Wake up one of the Cossacks, tell him to come here with ropes to bind this thief whom I have caught in the chateau!"

The angered woman fled away on her errand.

In ten minutes, the young scoundrel's arms and knees were lashed with rawhide ropes, and then—the Master cried, "Drag that brute over to the stables! Keep him locked up alone—there—till Boursakoff comes! If he speaks or tries to escape,—shoot him dead!"

Left alone, the two confidants of Love gazed in each other's eyes! "He knows nothing of Magda," resolutely said Xenia, "or else Arcady would have done his worst!

"He has only followed me—thinking you are pleased to amuse yourself with me!

"Now, punish the snake! He is a vagabond—he has no passport—a lying hound—and—a traitor!" "What

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shall I do with him?" demanded Serge. "You can not kill him now—the Cossack has seen him!

"I would have killed him and buried him in the garden! The dog would not be missed! There are only two things to choose from! Keep him locked up here as a thief—till all is over—or else, send him down to Odessa—to be put in the navy. Or you might have Prince Youresief send him away with a draft of soldiers to the Caucasus!"

Serge lifted his head. "I will have him put in the army as a drummer, and have him sent to Siberia. They will not lose him, out there! Youresief shall send him on with the convict draft in the fall! But, Boursakoff shall keep him under lock and key until the whole convoy is ready! I'll send two men with the brute to see him off, when the annual convict ship sails from Odessa!"

It was half an hour before Serge Dumont had aroused the Intendant and secured the spy. "I will be answerable for him," growled the happy bridegroom, "the blacksmith will rivet his chains to the wall in the bread storerooms where four men are always on guard! And —he won't talk!" significantly said the Intendant.

And now followed a week of burning anxieties, of sleepless pacing his lonely halls, for despite all the ingenuity of the devoted Xenia, there was no thoroughfare to reach the side of the practically imprisoned young Baroness.

With a desperate hardihood, Xenia had tried every cunning ruse and failed!

For, all the village of Bratskoe now knew that the entrancing Princess Vera Orbeleff was queening it at General Radovich's villa—and that the young Baroness was ill, tossing in a fever there—under the care of Madame Cherikoff.

Day by day, Serge Dumont's face grew hollow and haggard, and all unnoticed, his splendid harvests ripened toward the yellow gold!

Piles of letters lay unanswered on his table, and, but one sign of interest broke the mental stupor of the half-crazed lover.

It was when Prince Youresief's courier arrived with

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a special invitation to visit him at Bobrinetz for a fortnight to meet the Princess Vera Orbeleff.

Serge Dumont's letter of declination was couched in all the icy reserve of a grand seigneur and alleged his own serious illness as an absolute bar to any acceptance.

His only occupation was to gaze across the river at the still deserted mansion, for Madame la Baronne Lili was now reigning at Kief, with judicious impartiality.

"My God! What can I do?" cried Xenia, in whose veins now burned a fierce unrest. With a sudden impulse, she sprang to her master's side! "There is but one last hope! The priest's wife can make a visit at the villa! Neither the Princess nor the General will suspect her! And, Madame Cherikoff is very fond of her!"

Serge Dumont clasped the woman's hands! "Take the carriage and go! Drive like the wind! Tell the wife of the Pope to come back here with you, after you have sent her to Magda! You know what to say to the woman! There will be a thousand roubles for her if she safely brings me a letter!"

With hungry eyes, the passionate hearted man saw the coachman lashing the horses over the hill, and—he only raised his head when his faithful Intendant entered!

There was a strange light in Boursakoff's eyes as he resolutely said:

"Barin! I take my God to witness that I must send for Prince Youresief's physician—if you are not better soon! Think of two thousand souls here—of all in the other provinces who depend on you! It is the fatal summer sun fever—the malaria! Or—shall I summon Madame Federoff—or the Lieutenant! The villagers are excited—your household is half crazed. You are the last of the Dumonts!"

In a calm voice, Serge Dumont answered his staunch servitor. "You were born on this estate, Nicolas! You ruled here for my brother—if you urge this matter again—you leave Khaminavatka forever! I am not sick!—I have done!"

And before his pointing finger the sorrowing Boursa-

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koff sorrowfully receded, leaving the young man with a world of memories and of sighs.

The evening shadows had fallen when Xenia, her eyes aflame, glided into her master's room! "The priest's wife is below! She will tell you all! But, first, the letter!"

Xenia stood with her hands clasped across her heaving breast as the lover read the few lines so precious in his eyes—a death sentence of his hopes—a balm to his heart. The girl's trembling hand had traced these words.

"I am now only a prisoner at bay! Vera demands that I go with her to Prince Youresief—where you are expected. I have told her that I would die first! They have sent for my parents from Kief—and—my brother Ivan from Saint Petersburg. There is to be a family council. I have sworn to refuse the Maid of Honor's nomination, and they are holding it back—until my brother comes, and Prince Youresief urges me to accept! It is the beginning of the end—for—I shall demand to go home—to my own home. The Princess knows nothing!

"Beware of her! She is coming to visit you, en surprise. As for me, I shall be soon back to the Dying Water! Bid Xenia watch for me in the grove. Arcady will not come! I shall see you once again—and—then—I will find my own release.

"But—I know you will not ever marry anyone—but—your heart-broken Magda." And the letter was wet with his tears, as he kissed the beloved words.

It all seemed like a fevered dream to Serge Dumont now,—the secret counsels with the priest's simple wife were bound by a fearful oath upon the Holy Evangels to secrecy,—as she departed with her answer to the distracted girl's letter hidden in her bosom!

Late that night, Serge Dumont listened to Xenia as she knelt before him and then pleaded for the life of the love throbbing now in Magda's aching heart! "There is but one way! Listen!"

And then with swift insidious suggestion, the woman who fought for the fruition of her master's love pleaded with him. "Say not no! Say not no! to-night, beloved Barin," she cried.

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It was long after midnight, when Serge yielded, with one last muttered injunction: "Yes! But,—only at the last!" For his honor was fighting now against his hungry heart! How could he make Magda a wife?

Like the wolf in the hunter's track, Xenia haunted Bratskoe until the family party had broken up, and, the pale faced Magda had been transferred to her own home!

A grim scowl ruled the face of General Radovich as he welcomed his spirited nephew who had arrived from Kief, riding relays of dragoon horses—after his hasty summons by telegraph.

Colonel Milovitch had disappeared to Wosnescenk when the young Guardsman's impending arrival was already announced, and there was no one to witness the nephew's meeting with his grim uncle.

"What devil's work is all this?" cried the tall young grenadier. "Arcady has told me all,—give me but a half hour with Magda—and,—I will end the whole affair!"

Regardless of the prayers of the fascinating Princess Vera,—the half crazed brother galloped madly on to his birthplace, where Magda Radovich—under her father's care—sternly faced her doom, and turned her face away from the mother who had borne her!

General Andrè, on his porch, watched Princess Vera's departure, in state, for her visite de ceremonie at Khaminavatka.

It was midnight when the court beauty returned, and showed her tear stained eyes to her friend and fellow conspirator! "I drive home by the Baron's," she faltered. "All is lost! There has been a frightful scene between Ivan and his sister! He absolutely demanded her instant submission to her mother—her categorical acceptance of the Tzaritza's nomination. 'You have ruined us all—and—you shall yield now—or go to a nunnery.'

"He reproached her with a thousand things gathered from Arcady—vile accusations, and,—on her refusal to meet or speak to her mother, cursed her, as having brought disgrace in the family and found a secret lover among the nearest officers.

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"Baron Alexandre is helpless—and Lili, in a frenzy! Go there,—my friend, go to-morrow—or, else, there will be a tragedy! God knows what!

"I leave here to-morrow—and—you—you—can answer to the Tzar and Tzaritza for this insult to the crown! Magda has a heart of stone—and, she left the house and wandered out alone—*on the steppe!* I go to Prince Youresief—thence back, to Moscow and to Finland! If you care to save your rank,—take your family matters into your own hand! I have done!"

The defeated woman never told the astonished General Radovich of the icy courtesy of her reception by Serge Dumont! That she had tried every art of Eve,—that she had pleaded with the lonely noble to join her at Prince Youresief's, and that his proud stately sorrow had even disarmed the lovely serpent of the Neva.

In the hours spent wandering over the royal park,—in the tour through the varied splendors of the vast chateau,—in the sauntering by leafy path and blossoming orchard, where the flowers whispered of love and love's delight,—Vera Orbeleff met her first defeat at man's hands,—the cold repulse of indifference!

"I had pledged my heart to end this feud of years," the crafty woman murmured as her carriage splashed through the Dying Water! There is a curse upon this fair Kherson paradise! It is haunted with old hatreds—and these stormy hearts only nurse murder! It is too late—too late!"

With her castles in Spain shattered around her,—the defeated woman cast up her accounts that night!

"Youresief shall aid me! I will abandon the visit with General Radovich—for this girl has been driven mad by their brutality—and—the old Aide de Camp is a ruined man!"

Before noon next morning she was twenty-five versts on her way to Bobrinetz—where a wild eyed courier overtook her—with Andrè Radovich's heartbroken pleading to turn back.

It had been the darkened night of a violent passing storm—blown from the Urals.

Five miles below Bratskoe, the little pleasure boat of

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the young Baroness was found overturned and drifting in the swollen stream—and—never again did the light foot of the Day Star of the Mertvovod cross the threshold where an affrighted household vainly waited for her coming!

CHAPTER IX.

THE FOOT OF THE FOEMAN!—BETRAYED!

The sudden storm burst of the night of Magda Radovich's disappearance passed away by daybreak, and the spangled steppe lifted up its smiling face again to the blue clouds in peace! No sign was left of the violent elemental disturbance, save the yellow foaming waters of the swollen Mertvovod sweeping down to the muddy Bug.

A watershed of two hundred and fifty miles was drained by the Dying Water, which in the height of summer was only a succession of deep pools strung along its lower bed for fifty miles from the junction with the Bug.

They were united by threads of water seeping through the sandy bars between the precious lakelets upon which two hundred and fifty thousand cattle, sheep and horses depended for their lives in the blazing furnace of July, August and September. A strange and capricious stream—the fatal Dying Water.

But, on this morning when hundreds of peasants were searching the banks from the Radovich manor to Wosnescenk, the Dying Water had overflowed all the broad meadows in front of Baron Radovich's lonely mansion, and a yellow flood a foot deep was spread over the great flat.

It had been a fearful night, and all the Khaminavatka household knew, that, the Excellence Serge, cut off by the floods in the Park, had passed the night alone at the chalet.

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There was no ominous outcry on the domain of the Dumonts, and the whole two thousand souls were buried like ants with the varied labors of the domain.

At four, the Intendant's bell aroused the villagers, as usual, as well as the hundred and fifty extra manor laborers. By dawn, the air was filled with the lowing of herds,—the neighing of horses,—the bleat of sheep and goats, and the hoarse confusion of the swine, as the herds of the Mir were all driven afield to pasture in the unfenced fallow fields, attended by the children and old men of the village.

The women drove out their flocks of geese and ducks, the poultry proudly strutted in the golden sun and the sentinel sheep dogs followed their docile flocks.

Far away in the fields, the robust women followed the plow, with their seed bags, while the harrow moved along covering the precious seed so eagerly coveted by the gray-winged Napoleon ravens.

In forge, wheelright shop, and repair shop,—at Khaminavatka—the merry hammer rang on the anvil, the steam engines were all puffing away, the dozen great windmills turning their forty-foot arms, and a steam pump energetically threw up the waters of the Mertvovod to the huge cisterns supplying the fire tanks and service pipes of the vast chateau.

Over in the village, the storks were roosting on the thatched roofs of the cottages, or perched on the ladders, always ready there to throw off the thatch in case of fire, the only defense in a comparatively waterless land.

The roads were now thronged with peddlers' wagons and scores of wandering agricultural laborers, with stick and bundle, besieged the busy Intendant, for work.

The whole community from the patrician master to the last beggar knew that in the five months when the generous bosom of the steppe throbbed with creative life, they must toil for the subsistence of all in the seven dreary months of chill autumn, icy winter and drenching storm swept spring.

Nicholas Boursakoff, with the light of a new happiness on his face, was now afield from five at dawn to eight in the evening!

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Long lines of women at the noon hour crouched by the little fires in the steppe, preparing the noonday meal, —while under little tents, the hardy infants of the Kherson peasants drank in the golden air of the opening summer.

The blush of early morn lingered on the roses in the Park, when Serge Dumont, pale-faced, and with a strange light in his eyes, sought out Xenia, now the autocrat of the chateau.

"The time has come," he whispered, "for you to put Anna Ivanowna in formal charge of all the household—as far as the dining-room doors—the entire service, cooking, laundry and outside matters!

"You will have absolute charge of the reception of all guests,—the libraries,—drawing-rooms,—my cabinet de travail,—the dining-room service,—and—everything above the first floor. If you will come with me, I have some orders to give you."

It was a wonderment to the dozen upper servants to see twenty stout moujiks soon install the astonished Xenia—in the upper chambers of the eastern side, where the great mahogany armoire masked the secret door to the hidden rooms!

The grumbling moujiks protested in their hearts at a peasant-born woman's astounding rise in social rank! But, before their silent master's eyes, they quailed and curbed their vulgar suspicions as to the base born woman who now wore rich silk—and carried her keys on a splendid silver chain.

All the morning the transfer of furniture and decorations to Xenia's rooms continued, until the jealous underlings murmured, "Is she to be the Lady of Khaminavatka?" But, they were all rejoiced with a bottle of vodki on their dismissal! And so they stifled their wonderment.

And, then, when Serge Dumont had locked the door of the superb new rooms of his handsome housekeeper, he sprang to her side! "You know what to do!" he hoarsely whispered. "Let them all think as they will! It is our only safety!" Xenia, with burning eyes, whis-

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pered a few words in her master's ear—which left her pale and trembling!

"To-night,—to-night!" he murmured, "till then, we must trust to God's Providence—and,—to my right arm! After that—Xenia"—he smiled, "I fear nothing, for I trust you to the death! If any one comes to the chateau, send for me to the chalet, and,—on your life, speak not a word!"

Strolling down toward the stairway, he turned back. "Let my breakfast and dinner be sent down to the chalet —you most come with it yourself—and—remember—these rooms are your castle! Here are the keys!"

From his watchchain he detached the key of the mahogany armoire. "I leave you now to your work! Never let a human being cross this threshold! You will live here for your whole life! I shall remake my will—as soon as I go to Bratskoe!"

When her master had disappeared, Xenia locked her doors and descended to give some orders to her under housekeeper, which placed Anna Ivanowna on duty at the main entrances, and—then, she returned, breathless, to a solitary labor of love and fear.

When the startled woman arrived at high noon, with her master's dejeuner, she found the chalet doors open to bird and bee, the little jewel box was deserted, but, on a rustic bench near the bramble-hidden doors of the cave in the Park, Serge Dumont was seated, book in hand, and contemplating the fall of the waters of the Mertvovod—for in the sandy soil, the sudden flood was now dying away, the volume of water having passed with a freshet wave.

Xenia, her dark eyes glowing with anxious tenderness, leaned over her master. "The Chief of Police and the village priest are both here to see you! There are a thousand wild rumors flying over road and field! The southern banks are alive with men—and—the Intendant has come in from the field for your orders."

"What has happened?" mechanically demanded Serge, but their eyes met and dropped in a meaning silence, as Xenia glanced at the locked door of the cave, where

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nothing was now visible behind the wondrously rapid growth of the shrubs now leaping into a full fruitage.

"Remain here! Await my return! Do not move from this seat!" Serge whispered, as he handed her a key. "In case of accident," he hoarsely cried—and their eyes then met, in a pledge of eternal fidelity.

With measured pace, the young noble sought the courtyard of the chateau, where the humble carriage of the village pope was halted before the door! The forehead under the flowing golden hair sweeping to the shoulders was now overcast with a great sorrow, and, with a prayerbook clutched in his hands, the frightened priest was moving his lips in continual prayer.

At the side of the vehicle, the little form of the Chief of Police of Bratskoe was seen! A dashing young soldier was Lieutenant Nikon Zoubof, and he sat his nervous steed like a centaur! Behind him were ranged eight Cossacks whose twinkling steel lance heads gleamed blue in the sunlight.

At the door, with grave ceremony, the Master of Khaminavatka bade his guests enter! The young soldier sprang from his horse after nimbly saluting, and clanked into the library, his sabre slung diagonally, his double revolvers and cartridge pouches showing him to be on duty. With a wave of his hand, Serge Dumont ordered the customary refreshments.

The frightened priest in vain tried to move his lips! His little round eyes gleamed cunningly as he awaited the Chief of Police! For, the one represented a tangible and terrible Czar—and,—the other—only the shadowy Eternal Kingdom!

"Pardon, Excellence and Barin," frankly said the young officer. "I have fifty versts to ride before midnight! There has been a terrible occurrence! The beautiful young Baroness Radovich left her house, last night, for a stroll in the gardens, just before the storm burst! She has not returned!

"Her little pleasure boat which was moored in the large fishing pool of the three knolls has been found bottom up, drifting in an eddy, fifteen versts below here. And—also,—her veil and a light mantle have been picked

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up along the shore—as well as the two oars—found five versts apart! It is terrible—terrible!

"For, General Radovich and the Baron are with Madame la Baronne who is nigh unto death! The village physician and Madame Cherikoff are with her.

"Lieutenant Radovich of the Guards has command of all the five hundred peasants searching the southern shore of the Dying Water!

"A courier has been sent to Colonel Milovitch at Wosnecenk to turn out his regiment and watch the Bug, with boat patrols to try and recover the body.

"An express has also been sent for Baron Arcady Radovich at Kief—and Prince Youresief, the Marechale de Noblesse, who will be a guest of General Radovich at Bratskoe, where Princess Vera is in charge."

The keen-eyed young soldier was studying Serge Dumont's face. "What can I do for you, Lieutenant?" he gravely demanded. "Although I have no acquaintance with my southern neighbors, you can call on me for any help that I can render in this awful affair!"

"Nothing—nothing," uneasily answered the Chief of Police. "We only wish the right to enter upon your lands and to examine the whole domain! You can see how anxious the family are to recover the body of the unfortunate young Barina!"

The Master of Khaminavatka clapped his hands. "Send the Intendant to me," he calmly said to Anna Ivanowna. "I will give instant orders that all searchers will be permitted to have full access to my domains! You come and go as you will,—in the name of the Czar! And—Father Ivan, also! I shall also extend every facility to Prince Youresief, as Marechale de Noblesse.

"The whole Radovich family are welcome also,—I beg you will tender my peasants as searchers to Lieutenant Radovich of the Preobajenskys. The only human beings, I bar," said Serge, a pitiless scowl settling on his face, "are Colonel Milovitch, and Arcady Radovich!

"The one," he boldly said, "is a blackguard—and—Arcady is a recreant loafer, and a cowardly dog! If he ever crosses my lands, I will have him thrashed with a dog whip like a drunken peasant!

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"He knows why! And, now," concluded the young Excellence with a faint sneer, "you are of course aware that the fishing pool of the three knolls lies at the south-west corner of my lands! It is quite clear that nothing could drift either the boat or the body of this unfortunate young lady up stream, for the ten miles of our frontage! The storm last night would have swamped a frigate in the Dying Water! Look even now at the flood!" He led them to the windows! "Your proper search is below—far below here! But—do as you will! I join in the sorrow—and—all my people shall aid—if need be!"

"Excellence," nervously said the hesitating young officer, "the Princess Vera bade me tell you that the missing Baroness Magda has been somewhat ill and unduly excited of late! There has been a lingering hope that she might have wandered out of her gardens, crossed the river, and be found upon the steppe!

"We have searched all our lands—and—would like to search yours! It is a forlorn hope—but, who can tell what a demented young girl may do!"

The young noble faced his listeners, after admitting Nicolas Boursakoff, and carrying on a whispered colloquy. "We have two thousand working men, women and children scattered over the whole domain to-day. The flocks and herds are all in the fields! My Intendant here heard the news in the field at nine o'clock! He has had twenty Cossacks ride over forty square versts! They are all in! Not a sign has been discovered of the poor child! No one has seen her upon my domains!" he firmly said. "In our two villages they know nothing! I would be obliged, Lieutenant, if you would have your Cossack detachment at once search all my parks and plantations! Let them remain and examine the whole estate! I will take you over the chateau myself, now!"

He rose with a courtly grace! "The last, Excellence, is useless, your word is my law!" said the Chief of Police, with a low bow. "I thank you for the permission as to the plantations—and will now leave you to ride back to Bratskoe, and, as you wisely suggest, search both banks

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from the point of the three knolls as far as Wosnescenk. It is there—that we will find her later.

"But—the last lingering chance is in your splendid plantations! She might, in her delirium, have wandered over—if her boat touched your shore, for it seems that the poor child was suddenly attacked by a violent delirium last night! And,—what a heartbreak! A special courier has just brought her official appointment to be a Maid of Honor to the Tzaritza!

"Prince Youresief sent it by an express to the Princess Vera."

The blinking priest had busied himself with the wines and cigars, and in a low tone murmured his sorrows to the astonished Boursakoff. "Have you anything to say, Father Ivan?" calmly demanded Serge. "I shall, of course, send my condolences to Prince Youresief, who will convey them to the afflicted family!"

The priest cleared his throat! None of the Radovich clan were frequenters of his confessional, save the missing girl—and, Khaminavatka had been the source of his chief revenue—for the wild Serbian nobles were a godless race for three generations—and—duly hated of the orthodox church.

Only the gentle Magda had poured out her sins and sorrows in his ear, sealed by the awful sanctity of the unviolated confessional.

Father Ivan had carelessly watched Xenia's frequent visits to his house, and, the traffic in the peasant girls' embroideries and matchless linens duly explained that growing intimacy.

With true Russian cupidity,—his faithful wife had hidden away the rich bribes received of Xenia, for the rainy day which was sure to come—and,—she feared not the terrors of the church!

It had been Xenia's serpent-like wisdom which had detached the willing woman, so that Serge and Magda had met, all unknown to the housewife, in the three long front rooms of the ample priestly cottage, while the two daughters of the people croneyed in the household department.

And, of the messages and letters, the simple woman

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knew nothing, save that Xenia was carrying on a hidden correspondence.

And—even this,—was easily explained by the attitude of the housekeeper's revengeful and dangerous husband!

Father Ivan dismissed a faint growing suspicion which was soon dispelled by Serge Dumont's lordly frankness.

"It is terrible—terrible," he murmured. "I shall—of course—say masses—requiems,—I know nothing! The hand of the Lord is heavy on us!"—and, he sipped his last glass of wine en philosophe.

"Remember, Lieutenant," said the young noble, "my Intendant will quarter and entertain your soldiers! Leave that to him, and, now for the park and plantations! I will, before Father Ivan goes, say that should Milovitch or Arcady Radovich wish to enter my grounds, they can do so,—if escorted by you,—or any one of your gens d'armes—only in that way—for you—represent the power and honor of the Czar!"

Father Ivan trundled away, with his customary offerings of wine and cigars and had forgotten all but the good cheer,—long before he reached Bratskoe, where the wildest tumult now reigned, over the loss of the beautiful Day Star.

With an easy courtesy, Serge Dumont led the Chief of Police down into the gardens, after the Cossacks, dividing the area, had clattered away to scour the five hundred acres of the park and plantations!

The first place examined was the chalêt, and, then, with a composed face, Serge Dumont led his hawk military visitor past the door of the cave, where Xenia, still seated upon the bench, followed their movements with a heart frozen in a sudden terror! It was a critical moment!

But, an hour later, the young officer spurred his horse wildly over the steppe toward Bratskoe, leaving his police to finish their systematic search.

"I shall be happy to receive Prince Youresief and the Princess Orbeleff," said Serge Dumont, at parting. "If I can further aid in the search, or give you any assistance, call upon me! I shall order a redoubled vigilance, and, will also have my Intendant call upon Prince Youresief

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and give his evidence! In case of any news or the slightest discovery I shall report directly to you, Lieutenant," was Serge's adieu.

"The Dying Water is accursed, Barin," sadly answered the brave young officer. "First, the strange death of the Excellence Pierre,—our noble Marechale de Noblesse,—my friend—my boyhood protector—and,—now —this lovely girl's sad end comes to bring another horror!

"There never will be peace until Arcady Radovich leaves the Kherson forever! He is a devil—and only hate—sorrow and misery follow his cowardly footsteps! Neither of the men you spoke of—shall ever disgrace me —with their company!"

He spurred away—a loyal and gallant figure—leaving Serge Dumont alone,—trembling on the verge of an unearthly happiness.

Lightly as the leopard, Serge Dumont then sprang back to Xenia's side! "Go now—finish your labors alone! I will wait here!" The trembling woman seized his hands. "When?" she whispered—as her knees smote together. "Bring down my dinner to the chalêt," whispered Serge, "when it is dark! Here is the key!"

Then, drawing her to him, he murmured, "I will meet you at the garden steps at midnight! You will give the keys of your rooms to me! When we have come down together to the chalêt, you and I, you will leave your wraps and mantles on my table! I will return, not alone, to your rooms—and the household spies will believe it to be you! Let them deceive themselves! It is our only safety!

"Then, you can lock the chateau and steal back to your rooms at three o'clock by the servants' stairs! The door will be open! I will be there! And—have all ready—as if for a queen!"

The brave woman slowly returned to the house, while in the darkening shadows, Serge Dumont, stealing into the dense shrubbery, unlocked the door of the cave—and disappeared in an instant! And, slowly the shades of night fell over park and dreary river!

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A week later, the sound of mass and requiem mournfully swelled out from the open doors of the crowded church of Bratskoe! There were knots of gossips before the doors of every house in the scattered villages who sadly told the story of the growing mystery of the death of the Day Star!

Whether her corpse had been carried on toward the sea, or sucked down in an eddy of the muddy Bug was a problem for the wearied searchers! Across the valley of the Mertvovod, the lights gleamed out from every window of the unhappy home which Magda had quitted under a brother's bitter curse,—and the alternative of a court exile or a convent prison!

The ill-matched pair were plunged in the crushing sorrow of their pecuniary ruin, for General Radovich was now coarsely sullen and egoistic! "I am ruined and —you are paupers! Look out for yourselves!" he growled—as he left the house of mourning. "I shall take your son away with me! Our only hope is for him to rejoin his Regiment at once! I shall send letters from Prince Youresief, the Princess Vera and myself, to the Master of Ceremonies and the Private Secretary of the Tzaritza!

"For—a frank explanation of this unhappy death, alone, will save me my rank!"

The bereaved brother, with agony in his heart, knelt alone in prayer in Magda Radovich's deserted rooms! His handsome, manly face was convulsed with sorrow, as he bade a last adieu to the beloved girl whom he had left bright, glowing and happy—before her departure! His storm of passion had faded away, and he saw himself the tool of the ambitious and needy parents!

Goaded on with remorse, he followed his uncle silently to Bratskoe,—having locked up his sister's deserted rooms and placed his own seal upon the doors!

There was a sorrowful congress at the Bratskoe villa, as General Radovich welcomed Prince Youresief—and the hapless Princess Vera.

For, all the searchers were now in. Even the burly Colonel Milovitch, working with frantic eagerness, had at last ordered back his soldiers to their casernes! The

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lovely Day Star of the Dying Water was now only a gracious and graceful memory!

In an inner room, a splashed and wearied traveler clung to Ivan Radovich, now packing for his thousand-verst journey by post, to carry the sad news, that the Empress' honors had arrived all too late!

Arcady Radovich was wolfish in his fury. He drew the young officer aside and whispered vile suggestions which brought the brother to the point of frenzy. "You drunken fool!" cried Ivan—"the two never met in life! And,—you know it! My sister carried no secret to her grave!"

"They might have exchanged letters," urged Arcady, unabashed. "Xenia, his handsome mistress, had a lover over on our side of the river, and she has been seen to cross the Dying Water at night!

"Moreover, I put a boy on to watch this Serge Dumont's every movement, a smart lad! He found Dumont and Xenia, love philandering in the park—and—now,—the boy has disappeared,—swallowed up! I know another man—that Serge Dumont captured—and, perhaps, has murdered! Xenia's husband—was the man who kept the Post Station. Serge stole the handsome jade away from her poor husband—and—now—she is the keeper of his harem—at Khaminavatka! I've been to all the boy's haunts here in Bratskoe—and—not even on Sunday or a Saint's day—has he ever appeared since he reported to me! Serge has caught him and killed him—and—I tell you that I followed Magda in her midnight voyages! There was some secret—why not,—with Dumont!"

"Begone! You are a drunken fool!" cried the brother, as he pushed the brute out of his rooms. "Go back to Milovitch and pick up the crumbs from his table!"

In the splendid drawing room of the villa that night, the young man stood, with bowed head, before the courtly old Prince Youresief.

"Ivan, my boy!" the veteran kindly said, "you carry a great sorrow away with you! I am charged with a special report upon this happening. Tell me all—and—you can count upon my forgiveness!"

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In an hour,—the old diplomat knew every secret of the vulgar abuse,—the mad passion,—the heartless pressure of insult,—showered upon the hapless girl. "I see it all" —with a sigh, the Prince said.

With lightning rapidity, his heart bade him spare the brilliant young soldier, the story of his mother's intrigue with Colonel Milovitch. "The fault is not with you! It was the heartless ambition which would thrust a young girl out, alone—into the seething whirlpool of the Russian Court! Try and forget, in a brave and loyal service, your harshness to the poor dead girl! I have other views as to Vera Orbeleff, the General and your parents! They knew Magda's struggling soul!

"They drove her to desperation, with trap, and scheme, and coarse abuse! If she lives—she is already over the Russian frontier—never to return;—if she is dead,—then they killed her! And, now go, my boy—fear God, honor the Czar—and,—leave these worldlings to me! I would to God that you were a son of mine! They have preyed on your hot-blooded disposition—and brought you here —to break your sister's heart!"

When the young soldier had started on his lonely ride to the far-off Neva,—after an interview which Andrè Radovich and the wily Vera never forgot, the old Prince's anger settled into a cold, ashen rage.

"I will never get the truth from the Radovichs! I will take Vera—drive over to Khaminavatka—and—perhaps —Serge Dumont may tell me the truth.

"And, these Radovichs shall feel my hand! They have driven the poor girl either to flight or suicide. God rest her soul!"

That night,—a light footstep waked the echoes of the secret rooms where once a hidden beauty had lived and loved—and,—with her head upon her lover's breast,—a despairing woman cried—"It is you and I,—now, Serge —for life and death!"

"To eternity!" the lover cried—as he whispered—"I go to Kharkof,—in a week—and—you shall be a loyal wife, —blessed by the church,—my lily,—my darling,—my White Lady of Khaminavatka!"

Within a few steps—the faithful Xenia kept watch be-

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hind her double-locked doors over a happiness which melted two devoted hearts in the burning chrism of a rapture beyond this world.

It was a long fortnight which followed the mysterious disappearance of Magda Radovich. The peasants far and wide told ominous stories of the wild summer night storm in which the cruel Rusalkas, dressed in green leaves, the treacherous water nymphs, in envy of the young girl's beauty, had dragged her down into the dark pools of the Mertvovod!

"She has been stolen away to their fairy crystal halls, hidden down in the black, bottomless pools of the Dying Water!"

And, then, to the sound of wailing requiem and chanted prayers,—the little Kherson mourning community relinquished the last hope,—for, neither the Dying Water,—nor the Bug,—ever gave up the dead for whom they had so vainly sought!

The countryside was all soon busy in the fields, and none were left to mourn for Magda, the loved and lost, save those gloomy, secret antagonists,—the parents, in their lonely home on the treacherous stream, now purling along—a mere summer brook. And—a dull sorrow succeeded as of old—to the first wild storms of vain regret.

Arcady Radovich had wisely fled the wrath to come, and was hiding at the Post Station, where poor Excellence Pierre's murder had been concocted.

For, a thunder clap had startled both the guilty lovers of the Radovich manor—and the sneaking assassin Arcady.

Prince Youresief had been charged by the Governor of the Province with preparing a procès verbal of the death of the beautiful young Maid of Honor, who had belonged to the Tzaritza, from the very moment of the sealing of the patent of appointment!

No blushing young beauty could be named to the vacancy until the Day Star of the Dying Water was certified officially dead.

And, while the dejected Princess Vera, secretly instructed by the Prince, gained the confidence of Baroness Lili,—and the magistrate of Bratskoe,—the Chief of Po-

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lice recorded the evidence which the old Marechale de Noblesse extracted from the unwilling General Andrè and the now openly disgraced husband!

For, the stolid peasants and village dwellers did not hesitate to claim a judgment of God upon the heartless woman,—in the loss of her only daughter,—cut off in her maiden flower! It was Sin's sad harvest—this vengeance upon the unnatural mother.

But, the clear-headed old Prince saw a deeper significance to the terrible family quarrel which had driven the young fugitive out into the black midnight skies like a leaf in the storm! The cowardly Arcady—and the repentant Lieutenant Ivan had confessed that the use of force was threatened as a last resort to compel the girl to accept a shining misery at court which led her along to an officially designated husband who would fatten upon her charms!

"It has been a murder of the innocents!" growled Youresief, "and, I will not wait for the Lord—'Vengeance is mine—I will repay!'"

Ten days after the beginning of the secret investigation, a splashed Lieutenant of Cossacks, with a guard, drew up before the villa at Bratskoe.

With grim delight, Prince Youresief read an order from the Commander of the Twelfth Army Corps at Kief,—instantly detaching Colonel Michel Milovitch, for exchange—as Colonel of a light cavalry regiment, engaged in the harassing guerrilla warfare of the Caucasus.

A telegram from the Minister of War—directing instant obedience was inclosed, and, the Marechale de Noblesse smiled softly—as he endorsed a letter of transmittal for the two to the love-lorn Colonel.

"To be obeyed forthwith. Return receipt, with date and hour. You will leave, via Odessa, within twenty-four hours for your new duties, turning over the command to your Lieutenant Colonel."

In an hour, the wild-eyed Cossacks, refreshed and with fresh horses, were speeding on to Wosnescenk with Colonel Milovitch's ten years' exile in their leader's fateful hands.

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Gregory Youresief's voice was solemn as he called Alexandre Radovich to his side. "Order your carriage!" he said. "I have received semi-official intimations from the Governor, the Minister of War and the Commander of the Twelfth Army Corps which will give you one last chance to save your family honor. Here is a letter to the Princess Vera! Let her alone break this matter to the Baroness Lili. And, you, make arrangements to take your wife abroad for a year,—at least! Go by Odessa. Do not return to Kief! There are vital reasons —unless you wish to ruin the General—and your son! You have relatives at Ulitza, in Servia.

"Leave your wife with them—and—bid her keep her lips sealed as to the real causes of her daughter's death or suicide! Milovitch will not return to Russia—for ten years—perhaps never—if the Circassian swords are as sharp as I found them! Shut up your mansion. Leave your estate with General Andrè.

"The Intendant will handle it. I will aid him—and—you,—if you obey me. Go to Petersburg with General Radovich, to whom I shall entrust the procès verbal for the Tzaritza's Private Secretary.

"As for Arcady—let him live with your Intendant, here in retirement!

"I know not whither he has fled—but you may send word to him that Kharkov,—Kief,—Kherson,—Elizabethgrad and Odessa, are all closed to him.

"I have fifty complaints of dishonesty,—force, fraud, insults to women,—the disgrace of girls and other rascalities! He is to be suppressed—do you hear?

"For, one more outbreak, and he will be doomed to join the autumn convict draft for Irkutsk, now making up at Nijni Novgovod! Enough for him! I have given the Chief of Police my orders!

"And, now, my poor friend, you can see I have tried to save you—the General,—and, that brave rash boy Ivan! Go at once—if you need any funds—the General and I will provide!

"Please send Princess Vera back to me with the carriage—for, I shall not sign my report—until you are on your way out of the country! You will return direct to

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St. Petersburg—and Andrè and I will see that the Minister of War gives you the contracts! That will at least save you your estates!

"But, when you come back,—you will be the General's guest here—at the villa! I wish to be able to report that there is no possibility of any future tragedy on the Dying Water.

"I have unearthed rumors which force me to believe that the noble Pierre Dumont was foully done to death! God help you and yours—if Serge Dumont ever hears the whole truth!" And—Baron Alexandre—white-faced —slunk away to obey.

And, until midnight, that night—the dejected General Aide de Camp listened to the stern admonitions of the only man in the Ukraine whom he feared.

Prince Youresief was walking alone in the silvery radiance of the summer night, when Princess Vera's carriage drove up the lawn!

He heard, with delight, her brief report as she passed into the grand entrance to hide her agitated face. "They leave to-morrow, mon Prince, but—it was a horrible awakening for Lili. To know that she will never see Milovitch again!"

"Right!" growled the Prince. "Precisely as I wished it!" "She threatened suicide and raved for an hour!" rejoined the Princess. "Well, so far—so good!" coldly answered the Marechale de Noblesse. "If she kills herself—or clears out from Ulitza to join her lover in the Caucasus, it leaves me free to send Arcady to Siberia—and, clear up the whole situation!

"The three other men of the family will take care of each other! Now—ma Princesse, I have three days to see this work all finished up! Let us drive over to-morrow, and see Serge Dumont, then, the General, you and I, will go on to Bobrinetz, and he can escort you back to St. Petersburg.

"I advise you to spend the rest of the summer in Finland, for the whole of Kherson has its eyes now, on this villa and the mansion on the Dying Water!

"The truth is Baroness Lili has overstepped herself, in hardihood,—wickedness, and effrontery. I feel sure in

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my heart that she, Arcady and Milovitch were at the bottom of that still unexplained accident which brought about poor Pierre's untimely death!"

The old Prince marveled as Vera Orbeleff's sobs marked her passage up the great stair.

"Women are enigmas!" mused the Prince. "Perhaps this butterfly loved the grave Pierre—who knows? At any rate—Lili has found out that who breaks,—pays,—and, poor Vera—that love is its own avenger—that sweet-fanged passion,—that is so nearly akin to pain!"

While these two parted under the midnight stars—Serge Dumont, in his silent courtyard was dispatching a secret express to Kharkof. "You are to go by Krinkov, and avoid all speech upon your business! You are to remain at Kharkov, until Father Adrian returns. He will provide for you—and you are to return by Ekaterinoslav, and Bobrinetz.

"Here is a hundred roubles for you—there is another hundred waiting your safe return.

"Sew the letter in your coat lining—and,—speak to no man! You will arrive there, in four days—and,—on your return, reach here at night, and,—speak to no man of your trip!"

The youth bounded away, as his wild Ukraine horse scented the cool air of the steppes and broke out into the long, wolf-like stride of the Tartar charger.

"Ten days more," sighed Serge—as he sought the depths of the park—"ten days more—and,—the blessing of God will hallow our love!" He stole down past the little chalêt to where the woodsmen had been busy with thinning the huge trees of the overcrowded park!

A network of trunks and branches covered the door of the cave, which had now become to him a hallowed treasure house, since one with beating heart and gentle eyes had waited for him there, in the friendly gloom, when she had no place to lay down her darling head! "No one would suspect"—mused Serge—and—I may need this retreat, myself, some day!"

For, even in the thrill of an unearthly happiness, the future lay before him dark and full of shadows! "The Tzar never forgives a crime against the dignity of the

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Tzaritza! There is only the mercy of God—our own loving hearts—and,—my trust in Xenia!"

His heart craved the counsels of his friend Father Adrian,—a schoolmate of old, in the Corps des Pages,—a brilliant, gallant youth who had early turned from the mad gaiety of Court life to the calm of the priest's gown—and the soothing solemnity of bell, book and candle! "He will aid me—he will keep the trust of honor,—sealed with the seal of the confessional—God's blessed guarantee to the wounded spirit!"

And, in his mind, he followed the lithe messenger speeding on over the flower-carpeted steppe to bring the priest secretly to the lonely Palace of the Steppes.

But, one great regret hovered over Serge's every hour now! He dared not take Nicolas Boursakoff, his loyal Intendant into the confidence of his heart! For, the secret rooms now enshrined a lovely, glowing mystery,—an unfolding flower of perfect love,—and—upon the hiding of that mysterious love nest, depended the happiness of two supremely devoted hearts—even the lives of the two who had thrown all the world away for love!

But, too well—did Serge Dumont know that discovery would ruin forever his own standing at Court,—his blood shed for his country,—his gallant deeds,—his fifteen years of loyal service,—his honorable scars,—all would go for naught in the withering anger of the White Czar!

And, Magda,—the fugitive Day Star,—she, too, had cast aside the loving favor of a mighty Tzaritza to be only the Shadowy Queen of Khaminavatka,—a haunting dream,—a hidden delight,—the gliding vision to bless one lover's hungry heart!

The young noble sighed! "I could be perfectly protected if I dared tell Nicolas all—but—he has just taken a young bride to his arms! His surcharged heart could conceal nothing! The honest Kherson Samson would murmur in his sleep to his pretty Delilah, and,—what one woman knows, the whole world knows!"

It was fear which recalled to Serge the rough old Russian proverbs—"The wits of a woman are like the wildness of beasts;" "As the horse by a bit, so must a woman be governed by threats;" "The hair is long, but the mind

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is short;" "Towns built by women do not last;" "Walls built by women do not rise high;" and,—that last ungenerous fling, "Constantly dreaming of what others do!"

"No!" he sighed, "I must guard myself and give Nicolas his orders, from day to day! I must find a way to watch the villa—the mansion—and the Chief of Police at Bratskoe. As for the north,—I am well guarded!" "It is the unexpected which always happens," returned to alarm him again and again.

He had already seen the sullen, growing jealousy of the rapidly promoted Xenia on all faces around him—for, those who had served loyally for years in the family were now kept under the firm control of the station keeper's runaway wife.

Serge had noted the reluctant submission of pretty Anna Ivanowna, relegated to merely an upper servant's duties, though she enjoyed the spacious cottage of her dead aunt,—and the comfortable nest egg of silver roubles hoarded through a life time!

Even, the dumbly obedient Intendant had stared with open eyes when his master had bade him obey every direction of Xenia, as being his own orders—without ever a question of confirmation.

There was pretty Marika, too,—the girl bride, now an avowed enemy of the woman who had been merely a station keeper's wife,—promoted from a squalid den to rule the daughter of the rich farmers in the fragrant meadows below the bleak Post Station.

The collected luxuries of the chateau had all disappeared into Xenia's superb apartment, where Countesses had been glad to hide their graceful heads—and—the murmuring underlings had but one interpretation—a sinister one!

For the physical beauty of the now happy woman was enhanced by her formal elegance of dress,—and—as to the midnight strollings,—the converse in the chalêt,—the giving up of the master's whole time,—there was only an answer which branded Xenia with disgrace.

And, it was but natural, for Xenia, alone, now had every key in the chateau. She had ransacked the treasures of every press and closet to provide, in secret, for the

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wants of the hidden White Lady of Khaminavatka, and—dainty silver,—china of priceless mould—and all the graceful bibelots which women love, seemed to be doomed to disappear under the magpie hands of the village Esther!

None knew that these treasures were for one whom Xenia served upon her bended knees,—and,—that the proud seclusion of her splendid apartment was not a dream of sultana-like ease, but an untiring labor of love. So,—defenseless Innocence is ever unarmed before scandal!

But,—awed by Serge Dumont's stern and fiery disposition,—no one dared to question Xenia's entrance to her master's rooms,—nor the long hours spent by him in the apartments of the handsome peasant,—for, the old vaulted interior galleries of Khaminavatka made it impossible to conceal the visits of the seemingly devoted pair!

There were other village maids with burning eyes and fair white bosoms, who had risen to queen it there in olden days under lace canopies and rustle in silks with the sheen of pearls and diamonds! And,—while silently submitting,—a smoldering fire burned in many a hostile bosom. But, Xenia, sternly silent, braved these hostile eyes and grimly held her peace.

Of all the falsity of his position,—his real helplessness,—Excellence Serge Dumont was made aware in the long summer day, when he conferred with Prince Youresief, while the Intendant drove Princess Vera over the grounds and escorted her through the villages!

The two men had gone over the whole unhappy situation, and Serge Dumont breathed freer when the Marechale de Noblesse ordered him to send the treacherous orphan boy to the commander at Elizabethgrad, to be mustered in as a drummer for ten years, and depart with a draft of the Siberian Battalions just leaving for Nijni.

"I will give orders that he speaks to no one—and will be kept under strict guard as far as Nijni."

The old Prince sighed, "You will never hear of him again,"—and—he detailed how he had drawn Arcady

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Radovich's fangs. "He is powerless now—but,—look out for him!"

Serge was conscious that the veteran was keenly watching him as he drew out his opinion of the tragedy.

"I know nothing, mon Prince," he said. "As you are aware, I never saw the young lady but once—and—then,—in your presence,—and,—even then, she was deeply veiled. I am a neophyte here—and, I am already disillusionized!

"As Victor Tissot says, 'There is one Russia of Petersburg—feudal, aristocratic, official and bureaucratic; another,—of the lonely plains,—the sheepskin-clad, pensive and conservative peasant life.' And, I find that crime, scandal and throbbing passion haunt the lonely wastes as well as the capital with its gilded orgies! I am tired—tired! I am cut off from my kind, an exile in my own land.

"If not in mourning, I would travel—but,—I will spend yet one season in learning my duties here, and another in visiting my other estates—and—then,—as God and the Czar will." "You refused my invitation," doubtfully objected Youresief. "I have a dear friend,—a priest—coming to say masses in our family chapel for my brother's repose.

"I am in the midst of the agricultural labors,—I have a half million roubles at stake in this year's crops.

"The flocks and herds are to be divided and the increase sold—and—I am sick at heart! I will come to you—when I make my visit to my sister Barbe—after the harvest!" And, then his brow clouded in a sullen silence.

When the splendid dejeuner was served,—where Xenia displayed all the treasures of the family plate and matchless table adornments,—Princess Vera gazed doubtfully at the beautiful woman who waited behind her chair with a proud humility.

An acute judge of humanity in all its phases, the debonnaire Princess mercilessly rallied her placid host!

For, at once—the quick-witted bird of Paradise had seen that the relations between the two were far beyond the prosaic bond of master and maid.

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Serge Dumont was a master of social fence,—his palace days were not forgotten,—and he marked the eager attention of the wary old Prince while Vera Orbeleff drew him into a thousand little snares, harking back upon the mysterious disappearance of Magda Radovich.

It was with a shudder that Serge noted her sapphire eyes following the face of Xenia, as the brave woman silently served the haughty patrician.

And, while calmly passing through the double cross-fire of four eyes,—Serge was grateful for the even demeanor of the woman whom Princess Vera could not tempt into a self-betrayal.

As they rose from the table, with a light, mocking laugh—Vera Orbeleff turned to Serge. "Evidently, you are no anchorite! You are served like a Pasha—and,—I have no doubt enjoy your opportunities!"

With a bitter smile, Serge made his riposte, "Madame la Princesse—when one can not eat cake—one has to put up with black bread! Kindly spare me your pity!"

There was a quiet decision in Serge's manner that evening, when the state dinner concluded, as the dashing court beauty, with biting badinage, reminded the young noble of the absence of the beautiful housekeeper, who had been replaced by the Hebe-like Anna Ivanowna.

"Princesse Vera!" gravely replied Serge, "my servants find their only protection in their master!"

As the lord of the manor handed the enraged beauty into her carriage, he felt that he had made an enemy for life, for Vera leaned over and whispered, "I understand now why you declined Prince Youresief's invitation to Bobrinetz. I am quite inclined to believe, that a pastoral life agrees with you!"

"We are simple husbandmen and shepherds, out here —on the steppe—Madame"—rejoined Serge, "and, quite beneath your notice!" It was now an open war between them!

The frank old veteran lingered a moment out of range of Vera Orbeleff's sparkling eyes, now dimmed with tears of rage. "It is a princely place"—she sighed. "And now—the game is lost forever! If Magda had fancied either him or Wassili Federoff, I would have had a foot-

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hold—but—it seems that he prefers this beggar beauty,—a moujik queen!"

With a trembling voice, Prince Youresief bade Serge farewell. "Count on me! Come to me! Beware of yourself! There is only Arcady now—a mere wanderer on sufferance! If he crosses your path—shoot him down like a dog! Remember,—my heart and home are open to you!"

Both the Prince and Princess looked back, at the boundaries of the estates to wave farewell to Serge, who had ridden out to his lines! "A gallant fellow!" admiringly cried Youresief.

But, Vera—only buried her face in her scented handkerchief. "He will go like the other country proprietors,—down into the oblivion of a dressing gown,—a pipe and,—the arms of a too-willing village Venus! I thought him a gentleman! Take me away, Prince! Take me home—at your house,—I will soon forget this kitchen idyl of the steppes!"

"You are severe, Vera," kindly said Youresief. "You forget the tragedy which brought the gallant young officer against his will, a man of the camp and court, here to rule over a half a dozen widely separated country estates!

"It is true that Serge is unfitted for a lonely country life—but his career is one of duty—yours,—one of pleasure."

With a reddening cheek, Vera Orbeleff abandoned any attacks upon the fixed opinions of the old philosopher, who had gracefully ignored her bitter reference to the "kitchen idyl."

Not deceived,—Serge Dumont now awakened to all the dangers of his own situation, spent the evening arranging a secret post of his agents at Bratskoe, to report every movement of all members of the Radovichs, and,—even the magistrate and Chief of Police.

Night or day,—keen young eyes were to be on the watch, for—at the thought of the beloved and helpless hostage to fate—hidden there above him,—his heart melted in a wild invocation to a merciful God to spare that one dear and defenseless head.

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He was happier at heart to know that the two patricians joined the vulgar world in their belief of his passionate domination over the beautiful Xenia! "It is our only protection!" he sighed—"and, Magda knows her worth,—her bravery,—her loyalty! The opinion of the rest of the world is nothing!"

But, when two days later, Prince Youresief passed the Post Station with Princess Vera, for Baron Alexandre had already departed to convey his socially banished wife to Servia,—the homeward travelers caught sight of Arcady Radovich—lounging with the wolfish-eyed Anton Antonovitch at the squalid cottage on the hill where the black and white striped posts told of post horses for hire.

"There is the cause of all the trouble on the Dying Water for twenty years!" growled Youresief. "I hope the wolves will find him in a drunken fit and devour even his bones!"

Arcady had skulked out of sight, shaking his fist!

"Curses on you!" he yelled after them. "You old brute! You have driven Milovitch away—and,—left me penniless—and, without a refuge—save the charity of our Intendant!

"And—you drove poor Lili to a foreign exile! By God! I will have my revenge!" Into his vodki-sodden brain, a devilish scheme now entered! He drew aside the desperate station keeper, whose life was only a daily battle with the disdainful village stroller who was Xenia's successor.

"You,—a man!" he cried. "Your wife Xenia is lolling in Serge Dumont's arms, clad in silks and laces! Listen! I am to live with our Intendant. He is my faithful tool! Come over there for a couple of weeks! You know every inch of Khaminavatka and the park! I will help you! We can hide at the river bank. You can find her on her midnight strolls—muffle her cries, and drag her down to the bank. She fears you! I'll help you with the boat! Once on our side—you shall have your revenge—all I ask is that you will help me to mine!"

The villains clasped hands in a compact sealed by lust and hatred!

A settled, quiet gloom had descended upon both

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Bratskoe and the Radovich mansion by the river in a week, for the General had posted to Petersburg with the precious report which saved the family honor—and Vera Orbeleff, with him, in his britzska, dreamed over new social campaigns, destined to secure her future, before her peach-bloom beauty should fade!

"If the Minister fails me—there is always the General," she slyly mused, as she bent her dreaming eyes upon him! But, she had buried the dream of her heart, behind her—at Khaminavatka! It was the Waterloo of a life.

For, her whole motto was "Pour Parvenir," and—she had failed miserably.

But, in these brilliant summer days, Serge Dumont was busied with the solemn services at his family chapel, where Father Adrian, alone, received the confession of the great noble! No one had known of his coming, and Serge himself in the closed carriage brought his guest from Novokrainka, arriving at night!

It had been at sunset that Arcady Radovich, peering out of the Post Station, saw the brightened face of the young noble!

"Damn him!" he growled, "he shall die! I must reach him—in some way! He looks too happy!"

All unconscious of the impending curse,—Serge Dumont hastened along to his palace of the steppes, where, long after midnight, on that happy evening, Father Adrian was conducted secretly by the Master of Khaminavatka to the rooms of Xenia, the tireless attendant of a veiled queen.

There was but one dim taper in the locked room—where, a graceful figure in white stood by Serge Dumont's side, with only Xenia as a legal witness.

The silver moon lit up the dreaming steppes,—the perfume of the gardens stole in at the screened windows, and the waters of the rippling stream murmured their lullaby, as Father Adrian spoke the solemn words which united the Lord of Khaminavatka to Elizabeth Alexandrowna,—a veiled bride, whose gentle voice sounded like an angel whisper behind that shrouding film of Circassian ·ce!

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When Father Adrian turned to the table to sign the already sealed certificate of marriage, he was amazed to find the beautiful wraith gone—she had vanished while he handed his penitent bridegroom the document which made Magda Radovich a wife! "You must fill in the last name,—Serge"—said the priest. "I have now to go to my prayers—for I have risked my whole temporal and spiritual welfare—for you—for the sake of the old days!" And—so the hidden Day Star became a loyal wife!

And, that night the little rooms under the eaves of Khaminavatka's castle—were made a holy temple of purest love,—for—in the arms of the husband of her soul—the lover of her life,—Magda Dumont forgot the dark sorrows of her flitting forever from the home which had only been a happy one—in the days of her childhood!

"I ask only you—Serge—in the wide world—only you—and,—our double happiness! May God bless you, my own darling!"

The winds of heaven sang their wedding lullaby,—the stars of night cast down their silver beams in blessing,—and—watching fondly over the face of the woman who was his life and soul. Serge Dumont saw the White Lady of Khaminavatka that night, a radiant angel—asleep, with her lovely face pillowed on her slender white hands,—her silken hair streaming over the bosom wherein her golden heart beat for him alone in the triumphant ecstasy of a victorious love.

It was on the third day of Father Adrian's stay when an express rider speeding over the steppe brought the news of Madame Barbe Federoff's sudden and dangerous illness.

With a keen pang of helpless love, Serge Dumont felt how powerless he was to escape the hard conditions of secrecy, and, the fears of the vengeance of the Crown, in case of any untoward discovery.

The unsuspecting Intendant Boursakoff had already harnessed the fleetest horses and dispatched a relay of four ahead on the road, to be ready rested at Novokrainka.

The whole household had been gathered together in

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the chapel for the commemorative masses, and no one suspected the hidden reasons of the visit of the strange priest from Kharkov! And, now came, a sudden separation, a new trial!

With a pale face, Serge Dumont descended the great staircase, after giving Xenia his full directions, in case of the slightest untoward incident. "I leave you my life—my soul in your hands, my brave Xenia! I take an escort and the second Intendant, for Boursakoff stays with you! I shall tell him, once more, in life and death to obey you—and—guard you,—to execute your slightest wish! I have sent word to our hidden watch at Bratskoe—to report to you!

"I have forebodings about Arcady!

"If there is any trouble—you will have warning, and Boursakoff will defend you with every man and his life! But—tell him nothing—only at the last—to save her life!

"Should aught happen, he is to send an express riding night and day to me! And—I will return the moment I can leave my aged sister!

"For, Wassili has been summoned from Petersburg!"

Serge Dumont was proudly conscious now of God's blessing—and, the loving wife of his soul knew that they had only the fear of the Czar and the vengeance of her kinsman to dread!

Father Adrian, a born noble, sealing Serge's whole secret in his priestly bosom, had suggested a plan to prepare for gaining the forgiveness of the Tzaritza in advance, through the great Metropolitan of the Orthodox Church!

For, though he knew not the name, he guessed the lover's secret easily—and, smiled sadly. "What is right in the eyes of God, may be wrong in the eyes of man!

"If we can only persuade the Tzaritza that a romantic love secret marriage of love anticipated her decree, then,—pardon may follow, and peace reign!"

As they rode away on the steppe, where the murmuring wheat was now leaping up, half an inch a day, Serge Dumont wondered if he had protected every side of his domain! "With Youresief's warning, Arcady will never

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dare to steal into my domains! For the foot of the foeman would be the signal for his deportation to Siberia.

"There are the Cossacks riding around the park and plantations night and day"—and—secure in his lover-like confidence, he forgot the unguarded river line which he had so boldly crossed to hostile shores, to win the guileless heart of the sweetest flower of the Kherson.

In the haste of his sorrowful apprehensions, he had laid no interdict upon Xenia, as to Magda,—his veiled bride,—stealing out into the park for a midnight stroll!

And—the loyal Boursakoff, ignorant of the precious treasure concealed in the hidden chambers, contented himself with merely doubling the night guard around the house—and watching the outposts at the Post Station and Bratskoe.

But, the two plotting scoundrels were on the alert!

As Serge Dumont's open carriage dashed by the Post Station, with its escort of hardy Cossacks, Arcady Radovich leaped to his feet with an oath of triumph! "Quick, Anton," he cried. "Have a fellow follow these people to Novokrainka. If Dumont goes away for a week—and so it seems, from his traveling equipage—we can steal around to our village—surprise that hollow-hearted jade—and you shall have your will of her! I will hide you in life and death—and—her too!"

"Then," growled the desperate brute in answer, "I will spoil her beauty so that even Serge Dumont shall find her a witch. Come on!"

"That's your vengeance and mine," yelled Arcady. "I will have it done—and—she will never know who maimed her! Turn her loose on the steppe then! She must be knocked down, blindfolded and gagged!"

Three nights later, the daring Xenia had persuaded her young mistress to a dangerous venture. Dressed exactly alike, muffled and veiled, the two women, stealing down by different paths, met in the shaded recesses of the park behind the chalêt!

"I will wait and watch here, Duischinka," whispered Xenia, "while you gain a few breaths of God's own freshened air! If any one sees you they will think it is me!

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And—if you see any one—hasten back to me, the door of the chalêt is unlocked.

"I will stand at the front and guard it! Then I am ready to answer to all! You can lock the door on the inside!"

Ten minutes later, Xenia, who had watched the gliding form, heard a wild, unearthly scream, and sprang to her feet in terror, as Magda darted past her into the chalêt and locked the door!

On the river bank Arcady Radovich grappled with the frantic fool Anton, who pushed the boat off in a frenzy of terror!

"Hasten!" he hoarsely cried! "The place is accursed. I stole up behind my wife! It was her very dress as we watched her last night! I forgot myself and tore the veil from her face! A dead, cold face—a vampire yell! It was the face of the dead Baroness! And,—she vanished from my grasp!"

Nothing would persuade the timorous wretch to linger by the Dying Water—but—when Anton stole away in the morning—the sly Arcady's nerve was steadied.

"If there is no drunken vision in this"—he gloated—"my life is not long enough for revenge." The hapless lovers were betrayed by the pitiless Fates!

CHAPTER X.

XENIA'S STRATAGEM.—WITH THE DEAD.

Crouching like a tiger ready for a last spring, Xenia remained hidden behind the columns of the portico of the chalêt, until her keen eyes had explored every vista of the moonlit park.

In her hand was clutched the heavy knife which had once left its deep gash upon the coward hand of Arcady Radovich!

Silence now reigned everywhere, a dreaming silence broken only by the nightingale's entrancing note! The long alleys were deserted where the giant trees threw

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dark shadows over the graveled walks! The night breeze moved the sedges by the glassy lake, where the perfumed lilies silently floated, the cool breath of the plashing stream fanned her brow, and the air was redolent with the faint scent of the orchard blossoms,—the breath of the roses, myrtle and jasmin while the keen ecstasy of new-mown hay,—the Russian violets,—and the lilies of the valley, thrilled the peasant-born beauty from the glades now starred with blue forget-me-nots!

No foot of the foeman echoed upon the crisp gravel, and, the brave woman then drew a long breath of relief! But that agonized cry still echoed in her tingling ears!

"My God! It was all my fault!" she murmured. "I must hurry her back to her hiding place!"

With frantic energy, she appealed to the hidden Day Star, and sprang within the darkened room, as soon as the door yielded to her sinewy arms.

"Quick, Barina! My beloved mistress! My own darling one," she whispered.

"Back to your dear nest,—once there—you are safe against the whole world! Nay—tell me nothing now! Wait!" And then, with stern decision, she dragged along the half-fainting beauty.

They hastened through the deepest shrubbery, following the paths where the princely little children of Khaminavatka had played in by-gone years—leaving little by-paths made sacred forever by those pattering, childish feet!

They had already neared the house, when, suddenly, Xenia pushed Magda into a great clump of lilac bushes, and boldly strode out upon the path.

There before her, stood the hardy Boursakoff, a heavy oaken club in his hand, beside him the night watchman, and an armed Cossack.

"There was a fearful scream heard down here," cried Boursakoff, with agitation. "Was it you? What has happened?" He was startled, for he recalled the Baron's last words of trust in his fidelity!

And then, Xenia's quick wit saved the darling secret of her absent master's heart! "Some strolling ruffian attacked me in the lower end of the grove! He tried to

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drag me away, down toward the river! There must have been others with him, for, he ran toward the ford, toward the Radovichs!

"Search all our woods! Send your Cossack back for more men! The master forgot the dangerous river line and has left it unguarded!

"I will walk no more in this lonely place, until our shores are better guarded! Wait, only wait till the Barin returns! We shall catch these scoundrels!"

"It is that brute Arcady's work!" hastily cried Boursakoff. "Perhaps he and your husband were trying to carry you off! Did you see the man's face?"

"No!" boldly answered Xenia, panting in her excitement. "He tried to blind me with a shawl,—to choke me,—and, then, drag me away—but,—at my scream—he fled! Hasten on! I will go home! Come to me when you have posted all your men!"

The Cossack had leaped up the bank toward the stables to summon his brave comrades sleeping near their horses, and then the undaunted Intendant, with the night watchman, dashed on toward the ford. The brave woman only waited for their departure.

Xenia stood straining like a deer ready to spring away from the panther! When the two men were out of sight, hidden by the towering sedges of the river path, she hastily dragged the Lady of Khaminavatka out of her hiding place.

"Quick now, follow me for your life! Keep in the shade!" she gasped—and, in five minutes, the veiled beauty of the Dying Water was once more safe within her impregnable retreat! Xenia had locked her doors and darkened all her own rooms. They could hear without the clatter of the startled Cossacks in the court-yard as they mustered to meet a midnight foe.

Bending over the exhausted woman, Xenia lavished on the young wife every tenderness of her wild devoted nature.

A glass of cordial, and the sight of her now familiar surroundings had revived Magda, who faintly whispered the story of the sudden attack.

"It was not Arcady?" cried the anxious Xenia. "No!"

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faltered the Day Star. "It was a stranger,—a rude peasant!" With specious words of comfort, Xenia cheered the despondent bride.

"Leave all to me, darling Barina! You shall have the wealth of the greenhouses here,—you shall be showered with all love can crown you with! The master is going to bring every luxury on earth from Elizabethgrad!

"And, as soon as the snow is on the ground,—with relay sleighs,—he can reach the frontier in two days!

"Once safe in Switzerland,—you and he are there free of all government spies, and, he will find a nest in Italy for his darling bird! Now, I go to the Intendant. I will take all on my shoulders! You are to say nothing of our visit to the garden! For, they will all think it was me! My God! What a narrow escape!"

Replacing the slide and then locking the false cabinet, Xenia, with a firm hand, doubly locked her own doors, and descended to the first floor where the frightened maids were already clustering.

"Light up the whole first story!" calmly ordered the unruffled mistress of the household. "The Intendant is coming back soon! There was a band of robbers hidden in the Park!"

And, then, with perfect self possession,—she directed the samovar to be made ready—and refreshments provided for the returning Boursakoff!

Throwing a light shawl over her head, she swiftly sped across the courtyard to comfort the timid Marika, in her cozy home across the main square of the chateau outbuildings.

The Intendant's house was already lit up, and, an eager crowd of stout servitors had gathered ready to reinforce the men sent into the plantations.

"Only some straggling marauders, who attempted to rob me in the Park," Xenia explained. "Your husband will be back in an hour! He is safe! He has twenty men with him!" And—the two women fell on each other's necks in a friendly transport.

When the Intendant at last returned wearied from a

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fruitless chase, he sank into a chair by the table where Xenia was hospitably awaiting him.

"Tell me all now!" he gravely said. "We found nothing, but these, near the river." He held up a stout scarf, and, a heavy peasant's knife.

"I have posted a chain of ten men, walking to meet each other every five minutes; and, with orders to pass the word on that all is well! I will search further, in the morning. It was a dangerous attempt by desperate men! I feel strangely like sending a courier for Barin Serge!"

With an artful craft, Xenia wove her fanciful history of the attack! "I am so busied indoors in the day that I felt restless and craved a breath of fresh air! I was far beyond the châlet when this man sprang upon me! He tried to stifle me—yes,—with that very same scarf—and,—he only lost his courage when I struggled and screamed!"

"You are sure that it was not Arcady, or your husband?" cried Boursakoff.

"I was seized, from behind," she doubtfully said, "and soon I lost all control of myself! I know not!"

Nicolas Boursakoff sipped his tea and pondered long in silence. "I have left men to thoroughly search the crossing with torches! The rushes and mud banks would prevent them quickly escaping unless they ran far up the river, and you see,—they went down! It was surely these brutes from the other side!

"No matter who seized you, Arcady was behind it—and—your angry husband was not far off! If I were left alone here in charge,—I should send for the master—but,—you rule all now!" the Intendant gloomily said, with a half dissatisfied glance, at the calm woman facing him.

"Let us be friends, Nicolas Nicolarvitch!" Xenia frankly cried. "I only obey the Barin's orders as you do! Blame me not! I have already seen your wife and others and told them that robbers were in the Park! That explains all!

"It is the time for desperate strollers! Now—let the real facts be kept a secret between you and I! Wait till the Barin returns,—unless, there is another attack! I

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will come to you by night or day—if there is any suspicious occurrence—you shall then act—and,—defend, as you will, the master's rights. I trust only in your brave heart and clear head!" Boursakoff's face softened at the handsome woman's praise.

"Do not send for the Chief of Police about this! Wait till Baron Serge returns! Let him deal with those assassins!"

"You are right," said the mollified Intendant. "I agree to all,—only,—you shall not go out after this at night, without a guard of two men! For, I am responsible for you,—to the master,—you are now the apple of his eye!"

"Nicolas!" cried the outraged woman, springing to her feet, as a red wave flushed her face, but,—controlling herself, she held out her hand. "You do not know what you are saying! I promise to obey you,—but—never let Baron Serge hear you hint that I am his mistress—or, else, you and your wife would have to seek a new home—I am no petted mistress—and,—*you will know it later!*"

The abashed Intendant only slunk away to return with a new find brought by a Cossack messenger. It was a gag, strongly constructed of leather with loose woolen padding and strong linen bands.

"They surely plotted murder or kidnapping," slowly said the ashen faced Boursakoff. "My men found this, the marks of a boat keel, and the trampled footprints of three or four men by the stream.

"It is necessary, now, Xenia that you and I guard the dangerous secret! I shall put an extra armed man to walk around the chateau,—and—I will leave another on watch inside the chateau—on the ground floor at night! There will be bloodshed here—before the wheat turns to gold again,—I fear! But our whole lines are guarded now—it was a fatal mistake to forget the river front!"

While they separated for the night,—from his hiding place on the southern bank,—Arcady Radovich watched the great chateau gleaming with lights, and the flickering torches moving by the river's edge.

"Clumsy fool—I will work alone,—after this," he growled, as he returned to his room, drank himself into

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a semi-unconsciousness. "It will be twice as difficult now," he growled. "They have taken the alarm!"

Far away from the woman to whom he had solemnly sealed to his heart, Serge Dumont on this silvery moonlit night, was watching by the bed of his beloved sister, the head of his proud old line! He was hanging breathlessly upon the flickering movements of the lamp of life, and listening to the mother's plaintive calls, in her fevered dreams for Wassili, the beloved boy, who was now coming on, with the wings of the wind, from Petersburg.

Throughout the long night the troika, bringing Wassili, was plunging along with the wild sweep known alone to the hardy Russ to whom a rough khibitka journey of two thousand versts is but a summer frolic!

The young husband's mind wandered back to the exquisite creature whose heart had throbbed against his own, in the mingling of their ardent souls!

He designed to shower her with every secret luxury that his great wealth could command, to compensate for her confinement in the chateau—to make for her,—the orchards, gardens, park and plantation a fairy Bower of Rosamond, for the future—a labyrinth guarded by love.

Her bright smile had gilded the lonely steppe with all the radiance of an eternal love—and—her sweet face had been with him, every moment, in his long journey. And, he was so helpless until fate should free them both!

The steppe had received him in its verdant embrace, —as he rolled along,—already the high grass hid the black caps of his outriding Cossacks,—where the plow had left frolic nature to display its fullest energies.

A new force moved in his heart, in this balmy summer time, the magic philter of the fruition of a passionate affection!

Haunted by the one darling face, he closed his eyes to feel again the rapturous clinging of the white arms of the woman whom he adored. He sang on his way—and Koltsov's rhapsody came back to him.

"The steppe had a fresh fascination for me,—and,—the devil knows how madly I loved her! How beautiful she was,—and,—with what enthusiasm, I sang "The

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Time of Love!" For, his own heart had found its voice in this blessed springtime.

In the cool evening, the glowing carpet of variegated flowers was hidden by a light mist!

The sun sank slowly as at sea, the wind-blown scents became more searching, for every flower and shrub whispered of love and gave up its sweet breath to the evening star.

The dying sunset painted the blue skies, flecked with their silver clouds in broad bands of burnished gold. The wild fowl called to their mates by the sedgy pools,—the burrowing animals crept about in the gathering gloom and the cricket's song resounded.

In all the hushed calm, Serge Dumont rode along, with happy eyes, seeing in all a new loveliness for he loved,—and—was beloved again!

It was in the silent midnight hour, when Anton Antonovitch was creeping slowly along the shaded walks at Khaminavatka, with murder in his heart, that Serge suddenly sprang to his feet, for, in his heart echoed the long availing cry of the woman whose spiritual existence now was mingled with his own—in the overlapped circles of the blended souls of the true lovers!

A gloomy foreboding seized upon him as he dismissed the phantasy, but, a cry in his heart awakened him to a new danger! "The river—the unguarded river! And, —that outcast at large!"

He stole out of the sick room, and, quickly waking one of his Cossacks, sent the bold rider away, like an eagle in his flight!

"You will get relief horses at every post station! Deliver this letter to Xenia,—and return to me, also with your Intendant's message that all is well! I will make you rich for a year,—if you return in three days!" He had briefly written and ordered the picketing of the river bank, by night and day, until his return.

And, then, relieved at heart, he fixed his eyes once more upon the beloved sufferer.

It was three days after the abortive attempt at murder in the park,—before Arcady Radovich could bring the sobered Anton down to a cool discussion of his strange

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midnight encounter with the phantom woman in the grove.

Already in the two villages of Khaminavatka, and among the hundreds of superstitious peasants toiling on the steppe, even in Bratskoe's gossiping circles—the story of the phantom White Lady had been widely spread!

From hut to hut,—from mouth to mouth,—the story went, until every babbler had his new feature to add,—and, all men knew now that the chateau of Khaminavatka was guarded as if in a siege. The border vendetta was on once more—and the human wolves scented blood!

With sly acumen,—Arcady Radovich had carefully gone over every strange occurrence of the last few months! Jealous, dangerous, and, vindictive, he kept his peace carefully, but, dashing in at night to the Post Station, he had at last lured Xenia's husband away to Bratskoe, where the magistrate and Chief of Police were now openly wondering at the armed guardians sternly encircling the lonely chateau.

Anton's half drunken ravings died away into a sullen silence,—under Arcady's close questionings—for the scoundrel knew now that but one last opportunity was left to him to surprise the secret of the palace of the steppes!

The babbling courier—on his way back to the chateau,—had told of Madame Federoff's almost mortal illness, and that his own return with the Intendant's letter had guaranteed a long stay of the absent noble.

Cut off from any communication with his two brothers, or the young Lieutenant, deprived of the sage counsels of the sly Baroness Lili, and the resentful Colonel Milovitch, Arcady was left with only one close friend,—the village magistrate, a man who hated the whole line of the Dumonts, because they had built up their own villages and naturally avoided Bratskoe, the headquarters of the hostile Serbian clan!

The burning desire for vengeance on his foe thrilled in Arcady's heart,—and, with a keen cunning he correctly jumped at the secret of the failure of a thousand searchers to find the body of the young Baroness!

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"The boat was of course swept away by the sudden flood," he mused. "The articles found were perhaps left in it!" He knew all the shameful story of the whole family pressure executed upon his beautiful niece,—the mother's wild abuse,—the brother's sudden fury—and—of the sudden frenzy of resistance in which Magda had fled alone out into the darkness of the stormy night.

"This fellow is rich,—he is young and handsome," and as he gloomily mused the midnight meetings of Magda with the strange woman,—her long absence from her rooms—all these suspicious signs returned to convince him!

"In the name of the law, only, can I find these lines—and,—it must be a surprise!"

With a sudden conviction, he strode over to the villa and, bullying and begging, obtained five hundred roubles from the good natured Madame Cherikoff.

Late into the night, he communed with the stolid hate-bearing magistrate before whom he had unwillingly dragged Xenia's husband!

"You coward," sneered Arcady. "You let this man take away your reckless wife to be the keeper of his harem! If you wish her restored, play the man,—tell your story. It was no ghost, that you saw,—but, a flesh and blood woman,—my poor kidnapped niece—and—the man who has stolen your wife, who has brought her over your head, has also hidden away this half-crazed girl! And—he shall be punished to the utmost! Wait—till we catch them both!"

The taunted man freely plied with vodki,—fully gave his evidence, prompted on by Arcady, and, only begged not to be dragged to face the enemy at Khaminavatka. "Fool! I will go with the Chief of Police,—and, his eight gendarmes! You can remain here with the magistrate!"

Arcady Radovich had even now divided his five hundred roubles with the brutal magistrate, a moujik offshoot, only too glad to humble the proud Dumonts.

It was Arcady who suddenly waked up the Chief of Police with the magistrate's imperative order to prepare for a secret night march upon Khaminavatka.

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When the young Lieutenant learned the secret purport of the visit, he flatly refused. "I will not go like a thief in the night! Barin Dumont has given me permission to escort Arcady or Colonel Milovitch openly upon the grounds! I am no midnight marauder!"

Arcady saw that Nikon Zoubof was on the point of an open rebellion. "I demand that he receipt, for your sealed order! I will make my affidavit of course, to back up my friend's eye witness. Of course if you went in the day,—the poor girl would be quickly hidden!" The oily magistrate's voice broke the silence. "Leave here at four o'clock—then—you will ride into Khaminavatka at daybreak! Post your men around the chateau.

"Let no one leave! Then, examine every rat-hole of the old barn! Do as you will—Arcady! Here is your sealed order! I am glad to humble this upstart who has stolen an amorous wife away from her husband—a post official—and bought her, over his head!"

Nothing but an absolute order in writing forced Lieutenant Zoubof to go to his Police Station, and order his troopers to make ready, in the darkness, for a forced march!

The astounded corporal rubbed his eyes, as the officer departed to arm and dress himself in full uniform, secretly awaiting Arcady,—now preparing for the secret dash upon the chateau.

There were flitting lights in the magistrate's house, —the Police Station was all lit up, as the troopers turned out under arms, and,—in the darkness,—no one saw the agile boy, who lingered in a nook of the stable yard, and heard the corporal cursing the fool's errand!

"Wait—wait," growled the corporal. "When the Barin Serge returns, there will soon be blood flowing for this last insult! To search his castle like a den of thieves,—in the night!"

But, the stolid men obediently mounted,—and filing off two by two,—then drew up before the magistrate's house, where Arcady was now receiving the last instructions of the corrupt official!

The hidden lad had only waited to hear one of the soldiers say: "We attack the place at daybreak! There

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may be some shooting—there are brave Cossacks there! Come on, brothers, bring plenty of cartridges!"

Gliding away like a serpent, the faithful village lad only remembered his beloved master, as he threw the bridle over his fleet pony's head.

Springing on the bare back of the horse, the messenger of danger sped down into a side street!

Walking his horse slowly over the little bridge, he then loosed rein, and straight as the crow flies, madly raced on over the steppe, toward the fringing plantations of the chateau.

In three-quarters of an hour he had covered the six versts,—and, then, leaping the low garden wall, he ran nimbly down along the esplanade to where the arched servant's entrance was open night and day!

His bare feet pattered on the floor of the upper corridor, as he halted breathless before Xenia's door, and, then his sharp knock awakened the unsuspicious guardian of Serge Dumont's hidden wife.

Drawing the lad into the darkened room, Xenia listened with a heart frozen with terror to his story.

"You have only an hour," the frightened boy cried. "The priest's wife wakened me when she heard the police troops called to arms! She has been watching the Barin Arcady and—your husband Anton Antonovitch for two days!

"They have been closeted with the magistrate,—and Arcady himself, is coming here, with the Chief of Police —all his soldiers—and,—an order from the magistrate to search every inch of this house!"

The boy's teeth chattered with fear—and he was numb with cold.

"Slip down and arouse the Intendant," whispered Xenia, whose mind was working now with lightning speed. "Tell him to come to the south portico! I will be there in the dark at the door to meet him! Go to the stables! Turn out your horse,—and—say nothing! You are to ride back secretly when the soldiers come, and watch for their return. The Barin will make you rich for life! Hasten! Tell Boursakoff that our lives depend on his haste! I want only him!"

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As the boy stole away, she quickly revolved in her mind every plan of hiding Magda Dumont! "The cave?" "Ah no! It is blocked with the trees—and.—there is no way of escape! I must hide with Magda.—perhaps my mad husband will come!"

Falling on her knees she prayed for guidance and then sprang to the window!

The park lay dreaming silently below her, and only the beautiful octagonal chapel across the ravine was visible in the soft dusk of the fading night! "Saved! Saved!" she cried. "God's own house—the chapel!" A last desperate expedient had been forced on her by the sharpness of fear!

With trembling hand, she tore aside the slide door and then stole in and waked the beautiful young wife from the calm pure sleep of innocence! "Hasten, for your life, darling! Dress warmly—instantly! I will come back here for you! They are going to search the house! Arcady will be here in an hour! But, I will save you! God has shown me the way! Wait,—in readiness,—here! I will come back!"

With flying feet, she descended the stair, leaving the sobbing Magda on her knees praying in a sudden invocation to the God of the friendless. Her pale lips murmured, "Help! Help! Oh! My God—Serge! My husband,—save me!"

There was a tall form already waiting at the door of the grand salon, as Xenia clutched the Intendant's arm with a vice-like grip. "Arcady, my husband,—and the Chief of Police,—are coming with soldiers to arrest me—and to search the house for the young Baroness Magda! Fly now! I must never be seen! Say nothing,—but that I am gone! They will think I am at Elizabethgrad with the Barin Serge! Hasten to the chapel! Open the marble trap door to the vaults below! There, I can hide!

"Down in the crypt, below, with the beloved dead! I will hide in the ravine till you are ready! Leave the door open, and the crypt door open! Then, come in and lock both! Keep the keys in your own pocket! I will take one of the maids with me!"

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Boursakoff clenched his fist! "We will fight!" "Ah! God! No!" pleaded Xenia. "Remember—I am mistress here! They come, in the name of the Czar! With a legal warrant to search! Be smooth, submit, show them all! I will leave my own door open! Show everything to the Police Lieutenant! Do not speak to Arcady or my husband! Go now! The Barin will avenge us! You must send a courier at once for him to return!"

Boursakoff hesitated. "It is sacrilege!" the superstitious man babbled, "and already the park is haunted by this dead woman! No one will cross it after night—even my Cossacks will only watch there two and two, together! The Dying Water is accursed!"

"Go!" hoarsely said Xenia—as she pointed to the streaks of the dawn! "They will be on us soon! Obey me—or—I will kill myself here before you,—coward!" Her knife flashed in the air and she tore her breast open before him!

"I obey," he gasped—and darted away, as he heard her last whisper: "Go back to bed—and let them wake you up! Pretend sleep! Remember! You know nothing! When they are off the domain, you can come into the chapel! Knock three times on the floor and then open the crypt! Hide the keys. If they ask for them, say that the Barin has them! I will take a maid with me!"

In five minutes, Xenia stole out of the servant's archway under the main floor. She had snatched up a rug, and grasped a carafe of water and a flask of cordial.

Behind her was a muffled form, and the two panting women were both faint with dragging Xenia's heavy bed before the old armoire covering the secret entrance, and carelessly arranging the furniture around the side of the room to mask the dangerous secret passage.

A few steps brought the two women to the shelter of the ravine, and, before Boursakoff had raised the door of the crypt, the dark figures stood behind him! "Now!" solemnly whispered Xenia. "In God's name be it! We are watched over by the holy dead!" Then, the undaunted woman led her secret charge down the little winding marble stairway!

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The door fell with a clang,—there was the sharp grating of a key in the lock, and then, a clash, as the outer bronze door of the chapel was swung to!

With a sudden fright, Nicolas Boursakoff ran like a hunted wolf toward his home, for above him on the hill, he could now hear the jingle of sabres and the ringing of the bridle bits in the hush of the growing dawn!

With a bound, he reached his own door, and—then,—throwing off his mantle and boots, lay down upon a couch to await the summons of the enemy! In ten minutes, he sprang to the side of his screaming wife, as a heavy hand shook the bolted outer door,—a sword hilt thundered upon the panel,—and, a stern voice cried: "Open—in the name of the Czar!"

"My God! The police!" sobbed Marika. Boursakoff crushed her to his heart while he whispered in her ear! She fled away into an inner room—as he sprang, undressed, to the door!

"Who demands entrance?" he roughly cried. "The Chief of Police, with a warrant of search! Open or I break the door down!"

The red streakings of dawn made the figures of three men but faintly visible—the stern young soldier,—the wolfish Arcady Radovich, and,—peering over his shoulder,—the vodki sodden husband of the woman now cowering in the crypt of the chapel, and shielding upon her glowing heart, the defenseless head of the White Lady of Khaminavatka.

"Lead me instantly to the chateau—or, we will break the doors in," said the officer. He was determined to make Barin Arcady Radovich's outrage as foul a shame as possible,—for in his own heart, he well know the coming vengeance of the man now far away at his dying sister's bedside.

"I wish a witness—my master is away!" sullenly said Boursakoff, as his chief of stables came running up, with a drawn sabre in his hand.

"Put up your weapon! Fedor! It is the law!" sadly said the Intendant. "Listen! Go and wake up the under Intendant! Tell him to hasten to the main door of the chateau!" Springing to his side, Boursakoff whis-

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pered a word which sent the head horse trainer racing away toward Elizabethgrad—on Serge Dumont's best Orloff, even before the party had crossed the courtyard!

"He will have a life's ransom if he rides like the wind! Give him all the money that you have!"

The Intendant's heart sank within him as he saw a mounted sentry at each corner of the chateau, and a patrol riding on each side of the great silent palace,—around which the Intendant led the party, till he clumsily entered by the south portico door.

"Light up the whole house,—every room!" brutally cried Arcady Radovich, as he threw himself down on a satin divan. Boursakoff's clenched fist was raised.

"Hold!" sternly said the Lieutenant,—his revolver drawn and covering the enraged Intendant! "This gentleman has an order to search every room in the castle.—every corner of the grounds,—all the outbuildings,—and even to surround the villages,—and explore the whole domain! I must do my duty—hard as it is!"

"My God," mused the palsied Boursakoff. "They may stay here for days,—and—the women in the crypt will either starve to death, or else die of thirst and fear!"

And—so, he calmed the frightened domestics who came pouring up from below,—and ordered every room in the chateau lit up at once!

Taking up a silver sconce,—he bowed in silence, to the officer.

"I obey the law! In the name of my absent master, I authorize you to proceed."

With ferretlike eagerness, the three, followed by four dismounted Cossacks, ransacked every nook of the fifty-five rooms of the vast pile!

The servants' stairway was locked,—and two of the Cossacks explored the basements, while one stood guard at the grand stairway, the only means of descending from the corridors of the three stories above!

The sun was high in the heavens when the last corner of the vast house had been visited,—even the roof had been explored, without result!

Every piece of furniture, every closet, every dark corner had been closely examined,

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With a heart bursting with rage, Boursakoff kept a gloomy silence. To every question he simply replied, "I know nothing! My master is absent!

"I live in the Intendant's house where I was born! And I only enter the chateau upon my master's order.

"Above the first floor I have never moved, until to-night, save to go upon the roof."

The day dawned and still the search wore along during the sunlit morning hours.

They were standing in Xenia's superb chambers when Arcady Radovich gazed around upon the evidence of recent occupation. "Whose rooms are these?" he demanded, with all the haughty assurance of a noble.

"The housekeeper's," calmly replied Boursakoff. "Send her here," demanded the Chief of Police.

And, then—the Intendant called for the timid Anna Ivanowna, whose natural promotion had been given to the wife for whom Anton Antonovitch now hunted with a frenzied glare!

"Are these your rooms?" roughly questioned Arcady Radovich. The woman bowed her head in silence, for she had caught the Intendant's imploring eye.

"Another handsome jade,—a second light of the harem," growled the recreant noble.

"Here!" sharply cried the officer, "Search as you will, Barin, but—I counsel no insult—for the Excellence Serge Dumont has both a good memory—and,—a long arm."

"Where is Xenia,—this man's runaway wife?" said Arcady, pointing to the blear-eyed husband. "I know not!" simply answered Anna Alexandrianna.

"Gone,—that is all I know!" "With your master?" sneered Arcady.

"Ask him, when he comes back!" said the young woman, as she walked out of the room.

It was nearly noon when the intruders were called to the windows by the hoarse cries of an assembling mob!

For, no bell had called the peasants to their morning work—and now a crowd of men and women, infuriated and with howls of anger, was pressing back the sentinels guarding the four corners of the chateau!

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There were clubs, scythes and knives wildly brandished!

There were knots of hardy youths pressing bravely forward, and,—in a compact band at the stables,—the armed Cossacks of the domain only waited for the word of the under Intendant to charge up on the insulting intruders.

Throwing open the second story window, Boursakoff sprang out on the balcony!

"Peace, my good friends!" he cried. "For our Barin's sake,—go home! All is well!" There was an answering cheer and the threatening mass soon began to break up.

"Now," gravely said the Intendant, "I beg you for Christ's sake, our Saviour, to leave here as soon as you can! I will send all my Cossacks to escort you safely over the whole grounds and villages!

"If you linger long, these people will tear you to pieces! Your little squad will be sacrificed! Have I not fully obeyed the law?"

With a scowling face, Arcady Radovich reluctantly left the house of his enemy, and the others slowly followed him at his sign! The sly scoundrel had taken careful note of every room, of every passage, of every inner turn of the superb old castle.

"I may need to come here again," he mused—and,—then,—as they reached the lawn, he drew Anton Antonovitch aside.

"The birds have flown," he whispered. "Your handsome devil of a wife—and,—the woman whom I seek—may have been both spirited off to Elizabethgrad—to be hidden by that purblind old millionairess—Madame Federoff."

"What building is that?" cried the Chief of Police, pointing with his sword.

"The chapel," gravely said Boursakoff. "And that?"

"The summer house," replied the Intendant, as he indicated the chalet. "We will look in at the chapel!" shamefacedly said the soldier. "You can go down and search the chalet!" he sharply said, turning to the other two visitors.

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"Here is the key!" answered the Intendant, calling his assistant.

"Show these gentlemen all over the grounds," he calmly proceeded. "Send half your Cossacks with them! Put the other half on guard here, distributed inside and outside, the chateau! They are not to speak a word,—or draw a weapon,—only,—to watch—and,—remember!"

Arcady Radovich's haggard eyes fell before Boursakoff's burning glances. He stole away with his brutal companion! "I shall leave my sentinels, but only as a matter of form, till we return," said the Lieutenant.

As they gazed through the windows of the empty chapel, Nikon Zoubof grasped Boursakoff's arm.

"It is all the magistrate's doing, Nicolas," he said, sorrowfully. "I have let him have his way, for, if I hung back, I would only be sent away as a private soldier, to the Caucasus! Never fear, Barin Serge will soon avenge this brutal outrage! Do not speak to me, when we return!

"For, Arcady is a deadly enemy,—and—he has all the secrets of his family!" Boursakoff pressed the soldier's hand in silence, as they turned away from where the two frightened women now cowered below them in the protecting company of the sainted dead!

A half an hour later, the defeated searchers, rode away toward Bratskoe in a body, and Nicolas Boursakoff sent his Cossacks all out on post to take up their interrupted watch.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when the Intendant, stealing away alone, opened the door of the chapel, for his outrider had reported the last enemy out of sight! He then smote three times on the floor with his staff, and slowly raised the trap door!

The chapel was locked on the inside. A white wraith, Xenia, soon stood beside him. "Go quickly—send everyone out of the chateau—to the housekeeper's cottage! For, I must steal back and, no one must know where I have been! You can come back here and lock the two doors! When all are gone, just stand on the portico,—and take off your hat. I can see you!"

Xenia, through the little cruciform windows, soon saw

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the welcome signal, and then, descending, she raised the fainting body of Magda Dumont, in her strong arms.

"My lamb! My darling mistress!" she murmured, as she sped away into the shrubbery, holding the slight form in her firm sinewy arms.

There, in the tangled copse of the ravine, she soon revived the pallid girl with her burning kisses, and, stole back to swing the door of the chapel!

In a moment she was back at her mistress' side, and, a blessed spasm of strength enabled her to climb the stairway of the chateau with the veiled and muffled woman! The inmates had all fled away, as if from the plague,—for they knew not when the brutal searchers would return.

Tearing away the bed from the secret passage, Xenia carried her helpless mistress into the room where love had waked her heart to a new life!

There were double locked doors now,—and—a coming safety,—for was not Serge Dumont soon to return!

Chafing the slender hands, warming them on her generous bosom,—there—in that lonely haunt of a hallowed love, Xenia, the village peasant, swore an oath before God's high altar. "I will revenge this darling's agony! And,—Arcady Radovich shall know yet the woman of the steppe—in her wrath!" Her eyes had the tiger glare in them now!

It was midnight when Magda Dumont awoke to find her head pillowed on the breast of the hardy defender who had kept a faithful vigil over her, in the hallowed crypt where the loved and lost now slept the sleep that knows no waking.

And,—then,—came the blessed relief of tears—for Xenia whispered: "Barin Serge will soon be here on the wings of the wind! Lie still—on my heart, beloved angel! You shall never be parted again! Sleep,—for I will guard you with my own life!"

And, then, the innocent bride sank into the blessed sleep which God sends to His children here below, and, in that pure and innocent sleep,—in her loving dreams, her lover husband was by her side once more,—and good angels watched over her as the calm night hours passed

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on in peace and security—for the retreat with the blessed dead had saved the White Lady of Khaminavatka!

The courtyard of Khaminavatka Manor had resembled an Albanian camp during all the afternoon, and, Boursakoff and his under Intendant were forced to be aided bv the Starosts of the two villages and the wise men of the peasant clans in calming the excited adherents of the Dumont family.

For the sinister news of a forcible police visit,—an unparalleled shame—had spread over the whole forty square versts of the immense estate with the rapidity of lightning.

Armed with scythes and flints, with clubs and fish spears, with knives and sickles, the hardy ex-serfs crowded to aid in the defense of their absent lord's castle.

By a vigorous use of his Cossacks, by friendly explanation and even threats,—the Intendant Boursakoff managed at last to dissipate the excited crowds.

They went unwillingly, for now over on the Radovich estates, groups of curious peasants crowned every rolling hill and an untoward rencontre would have soon doomed the lonely mansion of the absent Barin Alexandre to fire and flame. A cry for vengeance was on every lip!

Boursakoff's river picket line sternly turned back all stragglers from either side, and finally, he rang his official bell, swung under its pent house before his door!

"Pay and rations will be stopped to-morrow, to every man who does not start for the fields when my regular bell rings for work at dawn! And the Starosts will also report for severe punishment all who linger in the villages to-morrow!"

Turning over his active duties to his under Intendant, he gloomily waited for the dawn, and Xenia's orders! "Oh! God—if the master were only here!" he sighed.

He feared the excitable nature of his laboring force, liable to the strange wild uprisings of Little Russia—and,—all were familiar with the incendiary Russian peasant's dread weapon of destruction.

Boursakoff sternly gave orders to his outlying guards to arrest anyone save government officials approaching —or tried friends of the family. All stragglers were now

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to be chased away by the wild Cossack dogs! He was stunned by the brutal desecration of the noble chateau —and, humilitated and cowed, he awaited the dawn!

But, in Bratskoe, that night, the wildest tumult reigned! The village babblers swelled the vague rumors with many new inventions, and a hundred new stories of the haunted park, the ghostly White Lady,—the unearthly midnight screams—and the raid on the chateau, were current!

But, of all men, the most agitated were the magistrate and the Chief of Police. The village Pope had called upon them to solemnly warn them of the ruin of the village in return for the brutal outrage upon the leading patrician family of the whole Kherson.

"Who is there but the Youresiefs and the Dumonts to hold up the old Boyar honor now! Fools! You will have a heavy reckoning to await!"

And, so,—the courage of the vindictive magistrate had oozed through his fingers, for, at evening, Arcady Radovich, with the half-crazed Anton Antonovitch, slunk out of the town in a little khibitka with Moschka, the Jew peddler, thief, smuggler and spy.

It was the priest's quick witted wife who dispatched one of the Khaminavatka secret agents to follow the three to their hiding-place and, then, ride on direct to Khaminavatka and report the facts to Boursakoff! She kept the lad who had signalled the approach of the police ready to enlighten Barin Serge of any happening on his return!

For, the thrifty soul saw the nucleus of a future! When Madame Olga Cherikoff, in her carriage, called the unhappy magistrate out of his house, she gravely said: "I shall go over to Khaminavatka, to-morrow, on behalf of General Radovich, to apologize for this outrage of that crazy debauchee Arcady!

"Neither the Barin nor the General would pay the slightest attention to the story of that drunken stationkeeper who would have beaten his wife to death—if Barin Serge had not given her a refuge from his murderous cruelty.

"Wait—you will surely feel the heavy hand of the General, on his return. You are an idiot. I write him

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of this outrage to-day—so,—you may well tremble!"

And, the frightened official was also sternly met with Lieutenant Nikon Zoubof's utter indifference to his fate. "You gave me written orders to obey Barin Arcady Radovich. You, alone, are responsible! I warned you —and—now—you must take the consequences!"

The young Chief of Police, with flashing eyes, said: "I shall wait on Excellence Barin Serge Dumont on his arrival! I shall report all to the Marechale de Noblesse, —and, the Intendant over there will be my witness of how I did my duty! I hope that my first orders will be to conduct Barin Arcady and the stationkeeper to Nijni —on their way to Siberia! As for you—your place is in the Bug!

"Don't you dare to leave the town! I shall put a sentinel at your door, night and day! I have already sent an express rider to Prince Youresief!"

And, so, the night was filled with unrest and alarms everywhere.

In the morning, the Khaminavatka peasants had all streamed out to the fields long before Nicolas Boursakoff faced the agitated Xenia! "My orders!" she said, "I have none to give! When I am chased like a thief in the night I will wait for my master's return! I shall not leave my room!

"I have directed Anna Ivanowna to take charge of all, until Barin Serge arrives. But, I would counsel you to keep four men on guard here below! You can come to my room if you wish to see me!

"But, as our poor, dear master may be murdered,—as his brother was,—you should send the Chief of Staff with a dozen armed Cossacks to bring him in from Novokrainka.

"And—so—night and day you must guard all,—he will be here—as the crow flies, riding as him who seeks the blood of his enemy!"

She turned back to where the dear beloved one lay tossing on a fever bed in a wild delirium! "I dare not send for a doctor! It would expose all our secrets! And,—only God and our Lady of Kazan can help us now!"

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For, the seven long hours in the stifling atmosphere of the crypt, where in the masonry niches, the coffins of the beloved dead were all seen,—the shouts and cries reaching them through the little crucial ventilating windows,—and the trampling of feet above them, when the chapel had been inspected had driven the gentle girl into a frenzy of unnatural terror! Xenia on her knees had prayed in these long hours. "My God! only that she does not scream!"

From her window, Xenia had seen the Cossack guard gallop away,—and,—her heart stopped beating as she saw Madame Cherikoff's carriage roll into the courtyard. In vain did the courteous Boursakoff, hastening to her door, beg her to descend. "I am a serfborn woman,—a peasant. My master honors me—that is enough!

"You are the Intendant! You must receive the lady! I will have a feast set before her! Let her horses be fed. Anna Ivanowna will wait upon her! You must attend her! Show her into the drawing-room, and, let her write her messages to Barin Serge! She is a Barina—a great lady,—and I,—only a poor freed serf! I am not worthy! You were born free!"

And, Boursakoff could not shake her proud humility. So, he waited alone upon the gracious visitor, who, with tears in her eyes, disclaimed the outrage on behalf of the General Aide de Camp! "When he knows all, his vengeance will be a bitter one!" said the heartbroken woman, who foresaw the downfall of their unhappy house.

It was with a wild pang of frenzied alarm that Serge Dumont received the news at Elizabethgrad when his staggering courier rode into the courtyard of the mansion where Wassili Federoff, arrived the night before, was now watching the return of life's healthful current to his beloved mother's enfeebled frame!

The young officer deemed Baron Serge mad, as he hoarsely whispered a few words of adieu, while all the domestics ran to hasten his travelling carriage! "I go with you,—to the death!" cried Wassili. "Not a step! I will grind these brutes to powder!" sternly said Serge. "Listen! I will end this feud for once, and all! Your

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future shall not be ruined! I forbid you even to approach Khaminavatka. I send an express to Youresief to join me there! I will hunt this mad wolf from Russia. I shall give you an estate, Wassili,—but one far from here—in Volhynia! And, by God, I will live and die at Khaminavatka—a victor over all!"

He stole up to the sick room and then fondly kissed his sleeping sister's pale face! As he cried "Forward—full speed," he hurled back his command to the eager Wassili. "Remember we are strangers for life,—if you ever come to Khaminavatka, till I call you, I will give you a home where murder is not blown in every breeze. Wait here with your mother! You shall soon know all! I hold them in my hand!"

As he rode on, out into the night, he recalled his sister's fond words spoken in the delirium of her illness, "You must now bring a fair young wife, Serge, to rule over the beloved old home,—for—you are the last of the Dumonts!" He had sealed that promise with a loving kiss, and to his golden-hearted bride—he dashed along with the wild oath, "She shall rule and reign yet—for Youresief shall know all. And—the Czar will pardon Love's error for Love's sake alone!"

Never such a slashing ride was made across the fragrant steppes, and it was at Novokrainka,—thirty hours later, that he met his Intendant and the armed escort.

There was but a few moments' stoppage—and,—as he sped along with the relay of the matchless Orloffs,—he learned the whole story from Boursakoff! His heart swelled in thankfulness to God as he saw Magda's secret was yet safe!

"Xenia! Xenia!" he murmured, "you shall have a home in our hearts,—and share our fortunes, for you have saved us!"

And, now, as the distant knolls of the Dying Water came in view, he yelled:

"On! On!" The smoking steeds were flying along, as a lad rode up to them, waving his hand! For a moment only—Serge halted. He tore Xenia's letter open—and then his face grew livid! "Boursakoff!" he cried,

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"they are in hiding over there—six versts, at the sheep wells.

"Take half the men! Bring me Arcady, the station keeper and Moschka—dead or alive!"

Boursakoff threw himself on a horse—and, led by the boy, struck out over the steppe, followed by six Cossacks armed to the teeth!

With glowing eyes, Serge saw the trees and windmills of Khaminavatka come up from the horizon! He steeled himself with a mighty effort as he descended in the courtyard, where the Under Intendant reported for orders! "Keep up the guard, as Boursakoff ordered! Take charge of the hands! Report to me at ten to-morrow!"

Once in his own rooms, Serge Dumont leaped up the stair to Xenia's apartment! The door opened, and—then,—with a glad cry—Xenia led him to the threshold of his secret wedding chamber! "Safe—better now—and,—waiting for you!" she whispered! With a glad cry—Serge darted into the darkened room, where the rose of his life unfolded to him her fragrant and loving heart!

At dawn,—Prince Youresief rode into the courtyard—with the Chief of Police of the Province, and a company of troops! With them was Boursakoff, bringing two wretches bound and manacled. Baron Serge—eagerly waiting—had heard the jingle of the scabbards—his old-time music!

"Now, for vengeance!" cried the Prince—as Serge clasped his hand. The eager noble grimly eyed the two wretches! "Arcady"—he cried. "Escaped!" said Boursakoff. "His time will come!" was the icy rejoinder.

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BOOK III.—PAYING THE PRICE.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WHITE LADY OF KHAMINAVATKA.

While the butler and Tourko escorted the General Chief of Police to the guest chambers assigned him,—the anxious Prince Youresief drew Baron Serge aside into his cabinet de travail. Already, the chateau was alive with servants hurrying the hospitable breakfast.

Without, in the courtyard, the Intendant was busied with the entertainment of the tired troopers, standing at ease in two ranks, watching their wearied horses enjoying the plentiful forage, after returning from a plunge in the stream, and a good roll!

"We must act quickly, Serge," said Youresief. "You see that Arcady has eluded us!" His heart smote him as he saw the haggard face and hollowed eyes of the young bridegroom lover!

"What do you propose?" simply asked Serge, as pretty Anna Ivanowna now arrived with the morning coffee.

"I leave all with the General Chief of Police! I will stand behind him,—let him act,—and then,—conduct the future affairs with General Radovich and the Baron! I propose sending an officer and a platoon over to be billeted upon Baron Alexandre's home, until further orders, the officer to be responsible for all happenings.

"He will picket that whole estate. An officer and a second platoon to be left here, to guard you! They can camp in the plantation! I shall ask the General here to send an officer and a squad at once to arrest that brute of a magistrate, and to send young Lieutenant Nikon Zoubof here!

"Then,—this very afternoon,—General Ratzo will hold an official investigation here! I would advise you to call

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in the Intendant—and, let him give the General a brief account of this shameful attack on your seignorial rights, —as well as your personal privacy.

"You shall be revenged to the uttermost! I only ask that you will not challenge General Radovich or Baron Alexandre except through me, for Ratzo and I will officially address them both!"

Serge bowed, in assent, and then told Prince Youresief of Madame Olga Cherikoff's visit of disclaimer.

"Good! She is a true woman, and you and I and Ratzo, must make her a formal visit to-morrow."

Serge sought the courtyard and invited the four officers of the troop within, as his guests, and bade Boursakoff join him.

"You are to briefly tell General Ratzo and Prince Youresief the whole facts," he said. "Let the Under Intendant now entertain these soldiers with every hospitality. For, we are in friends' hands—now—thank God!"

When the Master of Khaminavatka led the officers into the great library, General Ratzo had descended, and, in the dining room, the table was spread for a dozen guests.

The Chief of Police, a wiry, bullet-headed man of forty, was a dark, snappy-looking Tartar of few words!

"Will you kindly conduct the Prince and these officers to table, Baron," said General Ratzo, "we must get to work. Youresief has told me all your wishes,—and, his own! I will make an example of that robber nest!" His jaws snapped like a wolf's, revealing even rows of gleaming white teeth.

"Orenberg!" he said, calling the First Lieutenant, "saddle a platoon, dash over the river,—and—take charge of Baron Alexandre's mansion in my name!

"Picket the river line! Let no one enter the mansion! Call for all the entertainment you need. Have the starost of their village there.

"I will ride over in the afternoon and give you your written orders, after I inspect the place!"

The guests were hardly seated at table before the bugle rung out "Boots and Saddles," and, General Ratzo smiled

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grimly as the troopers clattered down to the ford. "My boys lose no time," he growled.

"We will excuse all ceremony, Baron Dumont," said the General. "I wish to send off two other platoons, and keep the fourth here to guard you!"

The three men of rank conversed in easy camaraderie, as the rosy Anna Ivanowna, the butler and Tourko plied the Czar's young officers with all the dainties of their generous larder!

In half an hour, Ratzo pushed back his chair, and strode into the library, his three officers standing motionless before him at attention.

General Ratzo, with flying fingers, scrawled an order!

"Here, Rosen! Take the second platoon! Arrest that fool of a magistrate at Bratskoe, hold him at the Police Station, send me Zouboff on the run to report here forthwith! Let him bring all the men who were in this disgraceful affair. I want their evidence!

"You, Stachof—will quickly ration your platoon! Take three days' grain for the horses! Here is an order to arrest Baron Arcady Radovich as a fugitive criminal!

"If you catch him, turn him in, in irons, to the Chief of Police at Bobrinetz! If you don't catch him, then—chase him out of Kherson!

"Take supplies from any Chief of Police, and, when you have gained final news of him, rally your whole platoon at Bobrinetz and await me!

"You, Captain Milanoff, will hold this estate, under Baron Dumont's orders, with the rest of the men until relieved!"

"As my guest," smilingly said Serge! The Captain bowed and, in ten minutes, his two platoons dashed away, himself, with the Under Intendant, riding out on a general examination of the vast tract to be protected.

"I will leave you and Prince Youresief to yourselves, for to-day," said General Ratzo to the young patrician. "Let the Intendant remain with me."

"His evidence, your housekeeper's and Lieutenant Zouboff's will be all I want! I will go over to-morrow and establish myself at the Radovich villa at Bratskoe, for dear old Olga Cherikoff will tell me all! We were

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young lovers together—once upon a time!" he sighed. For, even the grizzled Police General had had his beaux jours.

While Prince Youresief took possession of Serge's cabinet de travail, Serge Dumont led the pale-faced Xenia into the General headquarters in the library.

"I am under peculiar obligations to my faithful Xenia, General," said the Master of Khaminavatka. "Her life has been twice attempted here,—since she entered my service! She was before this the housekeeper! Henceforth,—she is one of my family!"

Xenia's knees smote together and her burning eyes sought her master's in a speechless appeal—as the General said, "Be seated, Madame!"

"I am but peasant-born, General!" she faltered.

"You have risked your life for mine"—said Serge—as he motioned to a chair. "You have been born again, in your loving faithfulness. Here—*you need no rank!*"

Leaving them together, Serge sought Anna Ivanowna, to whom he announced her elevation to all the active duties of housekeeper.

"You are to be the sole mistress of the chateau, until further orders. Only, the third story, will be Xenia's domains!

"No one is to go there, save at her summons. I shall have a suite of rooms fitted up there for myself. There shall be no more murderous attacks here!"

The niece of the dead Chuchinka turned away, after murmuring her thanks, with bright tears gleaming in her youthful eyes!

"How he loves her!" she murmured. "It is surely the madness of the summer time! The Barin is love mad!"

And—the poor, simple girl wondered if the all-conquering Xenia had not given to their lord the love philters slyly brewed by the old village dames who traded upon the credulity of the love-sick peasant girls.

For, a dreamy superstition tinctured every mind on the forty square versts of the Dumont domain!

And, even the head gardener thought that his master was demented as he received orders to cull each day the

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choicest flowers of the greenhouse and gardens—and bear them up to Xenia's rooms!

The great gallery of the third story was soon made a floral bower of every precious plant, and, before long,—at dead of night—a lingering servant below would often steal away to say, in hushed whispers, that he had seen a slight, veiled, ghostly form in white—stealing along among these beautiful tender screens,—the graceful form of the haunting White Lady of Khaminavatka!

Serge Dumont had stolen an hour to fold to his heart the beloved one, who now trembled with ecstasy as his hand touched the sliding door of her Paradise prison.

He had told Magda the legend of the beautiful one who had been the queen of her shadowy realm before, and, on his breast, with tender eyes, the girl wife had whispered, "Serge, my own, my lover—my husband—love has made this a holy place."

And, then his lips sought her silver bosom, where beneath the satiny skin, beat the heart which almighty Love had made an altar!

On rejoining Prince Youresief, Serge learned of General Ratzo's radically energetic movements! "He has dispatched your Intendant with five men to break up the old nest on the hill,—the groggery and Post Station.

"Anton's new wife is to be sent back to the Radovich mansion to be maintained in comfort by the Intendant. He is now extracting a confession from Moschka—and the crazy ex-husband of your good Xenia! Do you wish to see them?"

The ashen paleness of Serge's face alarmed the good Prince.

"What will become of them?" queried Serge.

"Moschka will get five years,—and, Anton twenty,—in Siberia—the General has had secret reports of their complicity with that wretch Baron Arcady, in many nameless villainies!

"But,—the false affidavits,—the murderous attempt of Anton seals his doom. He evidently tried to strangle and abduct his former wife. He would have murdered her, and thrown her body into the Dying Water! But, you will be in no future danger!

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"Ratzo has moved the Post Station to the meadow farms. Marika's brother is to be made agent,—at a thousand roubles a year,—and the profits of the custom. This will make him independent—and,—so—you will have the whole thing in your hands through your Intendant, his brother-in-law."

"Listen! Prince!" gravely said Serge. "I have told you the truth—but,—not, the whole truth! "In an hour, Gregory Youresief knew the whole story of the mystery of Pierre Dumont's death.

He mused, with clouded eyes—for a time,—and then broke the expectant silence. "I wish to end this border vendetta forever! We now have the General and the Baron Radovich in our hands as helpless victims.

"But,—the real criminals have been Baroness Lili,—Milovitch, and their vile tool,—the drunken and reckless Arcady.

"I will have Anton Antonovitch secretly interrogated after he crosses the Urals. The hope of having his sentence shortened by ten years, will bring a confession. And,—we can then extort any terms we want from the Radovichs when we get the station keeper's evidence to brand Arcady as the active criminal!

"I see farther than you do! Lili, that Messalina, wanted to get the estate in her hands and later to marry Milovitch! She trusted to this bloody feud to rid her of that poor jackanapes, Baron Andrè!

"Let me—alone—handle the whole affair! I will see this brute before he is taken away! I will have Ratzo keep him, in irons, at Bobrinetz, till I return.

"A fortnight on black bread and water will bring him to terms. There is but one thing I beg of you—not a line must you write to Princess Vera Orbeleff. I wish to see how deep she is in this conspiracy.

"I know that she wished to marry poor Pierre,—to reign over this Paradise of Loneliness. She now proposes to be Andrè Radovich's wife,—if she loses the favor of the War Minister!

" 'When the devil has nothing to do—he catches flies,' you know! Andrè—will be a safe guardian, and, Brats-

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koe villa, after all, is not so bad! She is a deep little devil—that one!"

The arrival of the young Chief of Police from Bratskoe with his gens d'armes called the Intendant to the formal examination of the whole outrage,—for General Ratzo had now transcribed all the evidence of Xenia—who was led away to the chalêt by Serge, for, Prince Youresief had said gravely, "I wish to hear all this evidence with Ratzo."

While Captain Milanoff recorded the shameful stories of the various witnesses,—the Master of Khaminavatka sat for two long hours in the little summer house with the abashed Xenia.

Every detail of the whole dangerous past was thoroughly probed, and then Serge took the woman's trembling hands.

"You have saved her life,—my life,—and—our double happiness! Know now that you alone can be our guardian angel until I obtain the Czar's pardon and a right to publicly recognize my wife.

"We are now bringing these Radovichs to their knees! But,—all would be lost, if they discovered Magda's presence! Even a kindly Czar would see the whole situation in a false light.

"You know what the peasants,—the villagers,—the whole household, now thinks of you!"

Xenia's face was bowed, and the crimson flushes dyed her cheeks and crimsoned her strong white neck! "Yes! Yes!" she murmured. "That I am only your plaything, —your amusement for a season,—your mistress!" Serge gravely bowed his head.

"That is true! Listen! I have ordered everything in the whole province available, in the way of luxuries, to be sent on from Elizabethgrad! To shield my darling Magda—you must now give up all semblance of work,—of any employment! We will be strictly guarded!

"No one will ever approach the third story,—or the roof. I will move my rooms up—and so—occupy the whole corridor, opposite you!

"In order that I can walk in the park at night,—drive over the estate by moonlight,—lounge upon the roof,

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and steal out with my wife,—until I can break her prison chains,—you must live in ease,—wear finery, and bear the burden of going around with me, in the day time, and coming here—in the afternoon.

"Of course, I shall be the only one to go in and out of your rooms!"

"But, how will all this avail?" murmured the blushing Xenia. "I will do anything you wish as long as I can look into the Barina Magda's darling eyes, without shame!"

"Listen, Xenia!" smilingly said Baron Serge. "The whole domain has now given you a character of their own making. It matters little! You will arrange a hood, veils, and wraps for my wife to match those which you will wear with me,—on all our daily trips around the estate!

"At night, you shall guard the only ascent to the terrace roof! We can, of course, be free there! I shall even send a piano into your rooms! You shall sing and carol as you will up there! When my wife plays and sings, they will think that I am playing and that you are dallying with me!

"Now,—as for the riding out and the park,—the resemblance of costume, will effect the rest—and, you and I can often boldly seek the gardens and the summer house at night!

"I shall drive you out over the estate by day until the costume is well known! We will always have a couple of Cossacks within pistol shot!

"So,—when Baroness Magda herself goes with me,—the whole little gossip community here—will know that it is you,—my mistress, my sudden fancy—the queen of the chateau!

"But, you must live up to your part—and,—so, be content to be a fine lady! In truth,—my wife's companion—you can relieve your mind when Father Adrian comes again from Kharkov—on a visit in three months—for—he will hear your confession! He will know all—and,—say nothing! Only in this way—can Magda bear her prison life!"

"My life is yours—and hers!" simply said the grateful

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woman. "Have you not placed my children like little princes? They will rise up to bless you!"

She covered his hand with grateful kisses in the humble fidelity of the peasant-born. "But, one thing more,—do you want to see Anton?" sadly said Serge Dumont! "He will be taken away, but, when he confesses, so that we can punish Arcady, he will be left as a colonist in Siberia. I will see him decently provided for,—and I will send that young woman out after him!"

"No!" cried Xenia, with streaming eyes. "He withered the flower of my youth! He is dead to me! Let him not suffer—but I can not forget his tiger-like attack on Barina Magda! He thought it was I—had it been so,—my bleeding body would have lain in the rushes of the Dying Water,—after he and Arcady had forced the truth out of me, by torture—so that they could reclaim the young Baroness—and,—assassinate you!

"For, I believe that Arcady knows that you have his niece in your keeping! He believes now, however, that you have hidden her at Bobrinetz—or else hastened her over the frontier.

"And,—in my dreams,—Barin," she cried, sinking to her knees, "I have seen him stealing on you—knife in hand! Beware of him,—for every one comes back but the dead. He is half crazy—and they will help him with money—and always hide him! He will wander back to the Dying Water, before he dies!

"The scent of the steppes is the breath of life to the Kherson born," she proudly cried.

"Ah!" said her master, "General Ratzo is a fierce enemy!

"He is hunting him now out of Kherson,—and,—as soon—as the General and Baron have disclaimed all responsibility, Arcady's passport will be erased,—his name struck off the list of nobles—and every police officer in Russia will be ordered to arrest him as a fugitive criminal,—and besides—we will soon have Anton's confession—for I feel that neither of the two brothers were directly concerned in my brother's mysterious taking off —though they were not sorry! No! He has passed out of our lives forever!"

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Silently, and now true to her new position in life, Xenia wandered back to the chateau side by side with Baron Serge, in whose presence she gave up to Anna Ivanowna forever, all the keys of the chateau, save the forbidden ground of the third corridor, the roof entrance and the summer house.

And—then—with a serene and smiling face, she faced the dubious deference of the secretly envious underlings who had all marked her rise from serf-bred village beauty, to be the darling of her young master's heart. A vicious triumph of sleek beauty!

There was a stately ceremony in the splendid dinner at which Lieutenant Zuboff was invited as a peace offering by the stern-faced General Ratzo! He was in a particularly good humor, at table, for he had the report that the Bratskoe magistrate was now looking through the iron bars of the police prison! And—so the cup of revenge had been once filled!

Prince Youresief and Baron Dumont escorted the General as he rode over to the captured Radovich mansion in the cool of the evening, but left him at the fatal ford, where Arcady's villainy had miscarried.

"I shall sleep over there,—but, I will meet both you gentlemen, to-morrow at Bratskoe villa! Your guard has orders,—Baron Dumont, to implicitly obey you! I authorize you to use arms and force for your defense, now,—in your own judgment!

"You will have my written report to-morrow evening, for, I shall go back to my duties at Kherson—and then leave Youresief, as Marechale de Noblesse, to make the social report to the Emperor's cabinet and grind up the two Radovichs! I will have this feud stopped—even if I have to expose Baroness Lili's career as a Lucrezia Borgia—and,—show up the General Aide de Camp's pandering to the private fancies of the Minister of War, —for he,—takes the social responsibility of that dashing comet, Madame la Princesse Vera Orbeleff!

"They shall find the war carried into their own camp!"

Riding back in the soft twilight, while the evening bugles of the troopers reëchoed from the hostile banks of the Dying Water, Prince Youresief said softly, "Now,

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Serge, my dear boy—when all is over, marry—and, live here in peace—if you really have beaten your sword into a pruning hook! This is a royal domain!"

And, then Serge's face lightened. "I promise you, Prince, that I will live and die here with my wife,—but—I must have a foreign tour of two or three years,—when the lady of my dreams comes to light!"

On their return, the great courtyard was lit up with great bonfires of rejoicing! Hundreds of happy peasants were gathered in the vast enclosure—and, the chorus singers alternated in the wild mournful songs of the Ukraine!

Serge, the Prince and the officers looked down from the esplanade, at the dances, after a distribution of refreshment had been ordered!

For the whole estate now knew that their beloved Barin had triumphed—and that the strong hand of the Czar had been lifted to crush their lord's enemies!

Serge drew Lieutenant Zuboff aside, as the young Chief marshaled his men to ride home under the soft starlight!

"Pray, tell the priest's wife that I send Xenia to see her to-morrow—on some very important business,—in the afternoon!

"And—remember—Nikon Nikonovitch, you have always a place at my table!" For—General Ratzo had commended the clear, soldierly frankness of the young man!

As the little squad dashed away—the music struck up—and the troopers of Captain Milanoff, seizing the pretty village maids, began to dance to their favorite measures, as the merry girls sang to the chorus of their mates!

Far above this happy scene, peering over the battlements of the roof, the White Lady of Khaminavatka looked down with joy!

For, Xenia had enticed her now happy mistress up there under the softly shining summer stars, and the girl wife had lost all her fears!

Was not her brave paladin now near her! And, with love-lit eyes, she hummed a tender refrain of an old ballad, "I have no fear—when you are by my side."

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Excellence Serge Dumont was light-hearted as he drove into Bratskoe, in his splendid victoria, the next morning, with the courtly Prince Youresief en grand traine.

Their escort of a dozen soldiers gave a peculiar distinction to the visite de ceremonie, and half of Bratskoe was in the streets at once, for the news of the triumph of the Lord of Khaminavatka had traveled as the crow flies.

A great concourse was watching the Police Station, where a guard was drawn up as Anton Antonovitch and old Moschka, in irons, were haled into a khibitka and started off for Bobrinetz as apprehended felons! Four troopers and a corporal, with loaded carbines, grimly watched their desperate prisoners.

General Ratzo's inquest was now in full blast, and every tchinovik of the town stood ranged around the guarded doors where the magistrate was now on the rack.

Already the town knew of his removal, the promotion of his deputy—and the probable dispatch of the offender to Elizabethgrad for a speedy trial and condign punishment! General Ratzo's mill ground far quicker than the mills of the gods—and—equally as fine!

On the portico of the Bratskoe villa, Madame Olga Cherikoff, with a wildly beating heart, awaited the visit of her master's bitterest foe!

When Prince Youresief, with winning courtesy, presented the graceful Lord of Khaminavatka—the Colonel's widow melted at once. Serge Dumont listened, with reserve, to the frank disclaimers and apologies of Madame Chinkoff.

It was Prince Youresief who calmed the good lady's evident fears of a calamity involving the whole Radovich clan. But, as watchful as an eagle about to swoop, the Master of Khaminavatka maintained a proud reserve, and most gracefully declined all hospitality and refreshment!

It was only when Madame Cherikoff said, "I knew and loved your noble brother. I had hoped that his election as Marechale de Noblesse would have ended the unfortunate estrangement of years! But—alas, he is

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dead! And, darling Magda—the Day Star of the Dying Water!

"It had been my dream, Monsieur le Baron, to see you Colonel of the Garde à Cheval, your brother Marechale de Noblesse, and Magda to have married your gallant nephew Wassili Federoff!"

Serge started, and grew ashen pale,—but with a mighty effort controlled himself, as the good old soul babbled on!

"Then—with General Andrè an Emperor's aide,—Ivan in the Preobajenskys,—and the Baron Alexandre well sustained here,—your two Kherson families would have ruled the whole Ukraine, even as the Muravieffs rule the Crimea and Taurida! Alas! It was not to be—we sow but hatred here—and, reap only blood and tears!"

When she had finished, with a profound bow, the agitated Serge took his leave, while Prince Youresief remained in a private council.

"I will await you at the priest's house, mon Prince," said Serge, as he begged to be allowed to send Madame Cherikoff a corbeille of the flowers and forced fruits of the Khaminavatka greenhouses.

It was an hour before the old diplomatist left the sobbing woman reassured.

"You can see all the ignominy of this frightful outrage," gloomily said Youresief. "Serge has authorized me to challenge both the General and the Baron to a duel to the death unless they make reparation! Where is Alexandre now?"

"He left Baroness Lili at Ulitza and is on his way to Petersburg to join the General! Do you want them here?" said the fair widow.

"For God's sake. No!" cried the Prince. "I have written them all, and sent our Intendant to bring me back orders," sighed Madame Cherikoff. "My position is frightful! What will be done?" "You will not be molested"—said the Prince.

"The mansion over there will be garrisoned,—no one will be allowed to live there save the peasants till this foul outrage is expiated! And—the General and Baron

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will be held personally responsible, now, by General Ratzo! Tell me of Arcady! You saw him!"

The poor woman sheltered herself behind a Niagara of tears.

"I gave him money,—he demanded it! He is half crazy! He is gone forever,—but, which way, I know not!"

And—the Prince could not conquer the charitable duplicity of the tender-hearted woman!

"You will find both the brothers will beg that Arcady be shut up for life in a Maison de Santè. They will disclaim on oath all knowledge of these coward attempts! If God had only sent Baroness Lili to the bottom of the flooded Bug,—then, all would be easy!

"She has a devil,—like Gregory Orloff,—a devil of wickedness and lust!" sadly groaned the widow. "She has ruined her family! Thank God that Magda is now beyond all shame! But, promise me," she cried—on her knees,—"you will not let them fight!"

"Never," said Youresief. "It is a case for the police, and the Czar's heavy hand—not—the last resort of honor! Olga!" kindly said the old veteran, "write them that if they do not make the amend and, be as mute as sphinxes in the future,—as harmless as lambs,—I will erase the memory of the family from the countryside! They shall be expelled from Russia—and—the Baroness Lili shall be branded—as she deserves! Her Russian passport shall be rescinded—and—she remain an outcast for life! You see how I struck Milovitch, her lover!

"That was only a beginning! Count on me—just as long as you aid me—and—not a word to Vera Orbeleff—I suspect that sleek devil of stirring up this trouble! She wanted to trap Pierre or Serge—and,—Lili thought to cut the way to Milovitch's side,—as his guilty wife!

"The play is done—now,—tell them,—to ring the curtain down!

"Promise me, on your honor, as the widow of my old comrade in arms, that you will, instantly, warn Serge Dumont, night or day, of any danger—and—then—notify both the Chief of Police—and me!"

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"I swear it on the Cross!" cried the woman devoutly kissing her baptismal emblem on its golden chain.

"Listen!" said Youresief. "Ratzo leaves to-night! He delegates me his power—I have my own! He has fearfully punished these poor tools of a murderous heart! Let the example reach the Radovich brothers! For, they now hold their fate in their hands. I will get Ratzo away to-night,—for—if he begins punishing—he is an Ivan the Terrible!

"I will make the report to Petersburg—and— close up the whole affair—only—I demand the absolute submission of the two Radovichs!

"Serge will never make any friendly advances—but,—he will keep the peace of God—as long as his domain is unviolated! I have restrained him—but, the next time —his peasants will give both these places of the enemy over to the flame and pillage!

"You cannot restrain a Russian country mob, when once let loose!"

Olga Cherikoff watched the Prince's retreating form, and then rang for her acting Intendant. "A messenger—quick, to go to Petersburg—by Kief. Let him ride express and take the post diligence at Kief!"

While she wrote words of fire—she shuddered at her last interview with Arcady!

For the brute had even threatened her with violence! "I hold Andrè and Alexandre in the hollow of my hand!" he had yelled. "I have nothing to lose—they everything! Damn Milovitch and Lili! They have both betrayed and abandoned me!"

"What mean you?" had faltered the terrified woman.

"I will go on to Petersburg and will force them to conceal and protect me! If I spoke the whole truth, they would both be imprisoned and attainted, and, Ivan would at once succeed to both estates! I will tell Ivan all!

"The boy is both bold and proud. He will protect me—if I make him Lord of two estates and the head of his family! He despises Lili, that heartless Bianca Capello!"

"Where can you hide?" murmured Olga.

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"Ah! My cousin Boris is the Commandant of Archangel!" boasted Arcady. "He will protect me! From there,—I can reach Sweden or England,—by any boat—if not,—then, I will winter with the Lapps—and the Devil himself couldn't find me there!"

Arming himself to the teeth,—with the fastest horse in the stables, and his pockets stuffed with roubles,—hastily borrowed from the merchants by the frightened woman,—Baron Arcady Radovich had fled like a thief in the night!

And—with a devilish malignity—Arcady had left the poor brutes Moschka and Anton to drag their chain over the Siberian roads in his place.

Driving as Jehu, the son of Nimshi,—the Excellence Serge Dumont reached Khaminavatka in time to send Xenia, in his private carriage over to Bratskoe for the concealed embassy to the priest's wife!

With bated breath, the lingerers in the courtyard saw the peasant woman, doubly beautiful in her borrowed finery, depart as if she were the born mistress of a dozen fiefs. The envy of her fellows followed her—and—with shaking heads, the old men saw the burning-eyed village beauty lifted up resplendent, in her gilded shame, as they coldly judged.

Even the stolid Boursakoff stood aghast, but—a philosopher, he murmured—"Among the blind—the one-eyed man is king! Xenia is the handsomest woman ever born under the straw thatch on the Dying Water! It is not for us to criticise our masters!"

And he drove away to where the waving grain now murmured in the ripening fields, leaving Marika, his girl wife, stunned at the resplendent apparition of the serf-born woman "who had arrived!"

That night, the dining halls of Khaminavatka rang to the loyal shouts of "Long live the Czar!" for Serge Dumont had bidden his household display all the riches of the old baronial establishment!

General Ratzo had returned at midnight, from his clean sweep of all the malefactors!

As he sat at the right hand of the host, the steel-nerved Tartar smiled at Youresief, who had been in con-

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sultation with him all the afternoon at the trial at Bratskoe!

"You will not be troubled in future, Baron Serge!" grimly said the General. "You are a brave and famous soldier! I leave you your own garrison! The enemy's stronghold is occupied! Justice has been done! If further outrage is attempted,—*shoot,—and spare not!*"

The hardy General's escort was waiting at four o'clock for the long swinging march which would put him a hundred versts away by the next midnight!

The younger officers were amazed at the regal splendor of the palace of the steppes—and—they marveled not at Ratzo's jocular adieu to Prince Youresief in the early dawn! "I leave all in your hands, mon ami," he said—"but, beware of Capuan dalliance! There is that young Queen of Sheba whom we saw at Bratskoe,—Dumont's Pearl of the Steppes,—beware of wandering in the park with her!"

And—so—the dazzling elevation of the silent Xenia was noised abroad as far as the emerald plains swept to the Dneiper and the Don! "I do not wonder at Baron Serge's liking for the steppe," muttered Ratzo—who had a rare eye for a fine woman! "There is fire in her eye,—and,—I've never seen a better figure!"

It was two days later when the old Marechale de Noblesse left Khaminavatka! During the long summer days,—down in the chalêt by the gleaming lake, lulled by the murmuring stream,—the two friends had devised Youresief's whole report,—his ultimatum to the two Radovichs,—and his final official action!

"Either a full, open, public disclaimer and apology, and a complete repudiation of Arcady,—leaving him to the law,—or else,—a duel to the final result, with each. If I don't kill them both—Wassili Federoff will finish the other"—grimly said Serge.

And, yet, he agreed to wait for Youresief's action, leaving the whole matter of justice and honor to his friend!

Serge had limited his disclosures to the fiery old noble with a consummate prudence,—and the direct connection of the three Radovich brothers with Pierre's mysterious

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death only awaited the "squeezing process" now being energetically applied at Bobrinetz to the two malefactors by the cold-blooded Ratzo.

The General had a consuming desire to obtain news of Arcady's whereabouts, and his methods were of the "lex talionis" order! In heart,—Serge was now anxious to be rid of his loyal old friend, for the golden honeymoon of his secret marriage was beginning.

He was at fault for an answer,—when the silver-haired Prince called him aside, as his retainers waited in readiness.

"Serge, my son!" he kindly said! "We are both men of the world! And—yet,—I adjure you to marry! The splendor of this dashing girl whom you have found here, is a demoralizing influence to the conservative and industrious peasants.

"I can excuse the follies of youth—but, even the Intendant has timidly confided to me his belief that, this Xenia has bewitched you! Marry,—marry in your own rank,—and—lead our Kherson noblesse as Pierre did!"

To the Prince's surprise, Serge showed no anger—but —merely smiled, and said: "My dear old friend,— Xenia is a very nice girl,—a superior person of her class, —and,—a loyal-hearted woman—but, I promise you— here's my hand—that I will be married—within a year! I will not bring our old name down to public shame!"

But, for all that, as the veteran drove away, he looked back anxiously at the beautiful chateau with its encircling park. "Primo inter pares," he murmured. "Here is the mystery of throbbing, vivid human life!

"A bright-eyed serf-born girl can enslave this court-bred patrician—as easily as Antony was led captive by the star-eyed Egyptian!

"It is a strange—wild—lawless life,—this steppe panorama! A human desert! where only the will of the master is the rule of the destiny of hundreds!"

And, then, all unconscious, proudly disregardful of the murmuring of his toiling clans,—Serge returned to his open dalliance with Xenia by day, and—from Bratskoe to Novokrainka the whole countryside soon knew the splendors of the insolent Queen of the Steppe.

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Only one fear now haunted the loyal husband's bosom. "If Father Adrian should die before I obtain the Czar's pardon,—then,—my Magda's wifehood would be imperiled."

He waited, eager-eyed, for news of the results of Youresief's ominous reports to the Court officials, and the letter to the two Radovich brothers!

All was now the dreamy peace of the splendid summer around, the trees hung heavy with fruits,—the park was in its meridian splendor, and the admirable arrangements of General Ratzo gave a security to the timid night expeditions of the lovely wife, concealed by day, in the secret apartments!

The spoil of Elizabethgrad had arrived, and there was continual merriment on the upper corridor of the steppe palace.

Serge's voice at his piano,—the gay volk-songs of Xenia,—covered plausibly the music welling from Magda Dumont's heart! The growing discontent of the envious peasants of the household was sealed by the exclusion of all the people of the chateau from the park after nightfall!

Only Marika and the sad-eyed Anna Ivanowna knew that their master wandered with Xenia there, in the silver moonlight,—or spent the happy evenings locked up in the jewel box chalêt!

Even at the bidding of his varying inclinations,—the Baron Serge was seen driving far afield in the starry nights, with the audacious woman at his side, only followed, at a safe distance, by two of the strange troopers.

And, then, in those golden harvest weeks, began the work of inbred superstitions! For—in the park,—on the turreted roofs,—and along the flower-decked forbidden corridors, was seen to glide the graceful form of the White Lady of Khaminavatka!

Serge Dumont only laughed merrily when the startled Boursakoff repeated these stories!

"Nonsense! my brave fellow!" he gaily cried. "Peasant yarns,—why do I *myself* see none of these mysterious happenings? *I am always about at all hours.*"

But, Boursakoff,—led on by his timorous and jealous

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wife,—and goaded on by the discontented Anna Ivanowna, had personally observed the silent, gliding form,—the silver veil,—the flowing white raiment, and marked the haunting form often disappear with a marvelous celerity!

"It bodes no good"—he grumbled,—as he piously crossed himself. "There is death in the air! The gloomy chapel will be opened, soon, for the last of the Dumonts!"

And,—only Xenia laughed in her sleeve—as she marked the widespread terror of her many midnight pranks. For, she aided the mystery—clad in Magda's white robes.

It was when the opening and shutting of doors,—the sound of gliding feet,—and all varied mysterious noises increased in the upper stories of the chateau, that Boursakoff finally begged that the terrified servants might all be allowed to sleep in the outer quarters!

"Be it so!" agnostically smiled Serge—"I hear no noises! I see none of all these wonders—and,—you know, I sleep up there—in the very domain of the White Lady!"

And—so, while the wonder grew, Boursakoff was fain to be content and silent, but he feared the loss of the harvests and the decimation of the flocks and herds. He was now thoroughly ghost ridden. Not so easily beguiled were the village women!

"It is Xenia,—the witch, who has brought this curse upon us!"—they muttered, as they patronized the old beldames who sold counter charms.

"She has bewitched the young master—and, some dark night—the Devil will carry them both away."

The fields now swarmed with the merry toilers and all along the Dying Water, the queenly breath of summer made rich the perfumed air! Heart against heart—Magda and Serge heard the plaint of the nightingale, as he drove the blushing young bride through the fragrant plantations in the friendly shadows!

They were perfectly safe,—for the stern troopers of Captain Milanoff guarded the now reserved private pleasure grounds with jealous eyes—and,—all the cowed

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household gave way in ill-concealed aversion to the supposed Xenia, and, kindly Fate smiled on them!

It was while Serge tasted the rich fruits of a double happiness, that Prince Youresief, was vainly communing with himself at Bobrinetz.

He had heard the full confession of the now disheartened Anton Antonovitch! The sly rogue had only partly told his story to General Ratzo, who had wreaked his vengeance upon the unhappy Jew Moschka. There was now a divided duty before the old Marechale de Noblesse.

He had received the most abject disclaimers from General Andrè and the Baron Alexandre,—who had confirmed in person at the Court the Prince's reports of the unhappy death of the vanished Baroness Magda.

And so,—another dark-eyed young Russian patrician was soon named as Maid of Honor to flutter, a lovely moth, in the fierce light which beats upon the throne of the Czar.

A marble cenotaph in the family burying ground at Bratśkoe villa now bore the legend of the death of the Day Star of the Dying Water—"Drowned in the river Mertvovod."

It was at the secret suggestion of General Radovich that his brother the Baron, now luxuriating in the Army contracts, should be allowed to come alone to the Bratskoe villa and carry on his business, reporting to Prince Youresief—and—never setting foot on the home estate! "Madame la Baronne was to remain abroad—for a period of years," and—Prince Youresief grimly smiled at the gazetted news of the death of Colonel Milovitch, slain in a daring Circassian foray!

"Voilà le fin de l'histoire," he growled, dismissing the name of the would-be assassin to oblivion!

Of Arcady Radovich, the half-crazed fugitive, there was not even a trace! And, both the brothers offered no opposition to his internment for life as insane, if caught! It was with a lip curling in scorn that Prince Youresief ejaculated "Liars!"

He knew now that both the crafty court loungers

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would fain sacrifice their outcast brother to the hungry maw of an iron justice!

"I see it all!" he mused. "They used the poor fool as an irresponsible tool—and—coward-like—wished to know no details—but,—they laughed to see the dark work go on to its culmination!

"For their own dark ends,—Milovitch and the reckless Lili gladly dabbled in this murder brokerage!"

And sorely beset, Prince Youresief could not make up his mind to disclose to the fiery Serge Dumont the whole story of the ex-station keeper now on his way to Siberia to toil in the salt mines of Irkutsk.

Anton Antonovitch, with sobs and groans, had protested that he had only learned of the plot which "removed" the Excellence Pierre Dumont, after his own splendid horses had been made their master's executioners.

"It was a poor devil hired by Arcady,—who set the strong hide rope barriers in the road below,—in the gorge! He was paid to finish the helpless man with the knife—if he were only stunned and bruised—but flung headlong down the bank, the Barin's neck was broken, and,—the sly fellow did not need to mangle his body!

"I only learned this later through the Jew Moschka, who brought the hard money from Arcady to the poor wretch! I was poor,—they spent the money at the station—and—Arcady could only pay what he could scrape together from Baroness Lili and her lover!

"For, the job once done,—the two brothers ignored the whole thing—and, coldly thrust Arcady out—to be a pensioner on the guilty lovers at the mansion.

"They feared his drunken babbling tongue!"

When Prince Youresief demanded why he had not given the lurking assassin up—Anton swore on the cross that he had intended to send his wife Xenia to notify the Chief of Police, through the priest at Bratskoe.

"I am but a poor peasant! I feared Arcady!" howled Anton, "and, Barin Serge made a descent upon my house. Moschka gave the signal to the murderer who fled away on the steppe and had never been heard of!

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I thought Barin Serge had captured him; it seems not so! But, he has stolen away my wife,—my Xenia!

"And, you know what he has done with her! Should I have licked the dust of my enemy's boots? It was too late! I feared arrest and ruin!"

Revolving all this doubtful story, Prince Youresief decided not to uselessly enrage Serge.

"I may later get absolute proof of the complicity of the General and the Barin yet! In the meantime—this—will give me an absolute mastery of the Radovich family—and—the control of Arcady! He may be caught and confess!

"Then—I can settle forever the feud on the Dying Water—if,—Serge would only marry!"

CHAPTER XII.

A WEAVING SPIDER.

The steppe was scorched and burning brown in the intense September heat when Prince Youresief rested from his labors of closing up the Kherson feud which had so long arrayed the dwellers on the north and south banks of the Dying Water against each other.

He was perfectly aware of the insincerity of the General and the Barin Radovich whose official disclaimers of responsibility had been publicly noised abroad, with profuse apologies to the Excellence Serge Dumont, delivered through the Governor of the Province,—General Ratzo,—and the assembly of Notables at Elizabethgrad.

Through the Marechale de Noblesse, the frightened brothers had transmitted to their hereditary enemy a joint letter of abject apology for the "vagaries of their unhappy brother Arcady."

In a coldly framed reply, the Lord of Khaminavatka had stated his surprise at the past overt acts, and he expressed a hope that the neighboring estate in future would be handled through the agency of Lieut. Ivan

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Radovich of the Preobajensky Guards, "than whom a more gallant or promising young officer does not adorn His Imperial Majesty's service."

And, so, content with these public apologies, Serge Dumont left his challenges to the secretly guilty brothers in abeyance.

For, he had artfully avoided any direct response to the two apologists, his answer being even directed to Prince Youresief for transmittal at second hand.

"The old feeling lingers," muttered Youresief, "on both sides! The only way is to make a solitude and,—call it peace! Perhaps,—young Ivan and Wassili Federoff will in time bury the ancient hatred!

"For, if Serge does not marry,—Wassili will be the heir." A long secret conference with the now convalescent Madame Federoff delighted the courtly Prince, for the two young duelists had, in fact, reached a point of growing personal friendship, and graceful camaraderie.

With gentle deprecation,—Youresief avoided the delicate subject of the promoted peasant girl—for "Maamselle Xenia" was now the one central figure of Kherson gossip!

The merchants of Kherson, Kharkov, and Elizabethgrad—nay even of Kief and Odessa, marvelled at the lavish expenditures of Serge Dumont for his village-bred Sultana!

"Pray, my dear Prince, aid me to deliver Serge from this "man eater," sobbed Madame Barbe. "He has never even noticed my letters of remonstrance."

The old Prince drily remarked, "My dear Madame! I fear these are very delicate matters! I would trust to a final self-awakening,—an inevitable satiety,—for I have never known moral lectures, especially at long range, to counteract the effect of a pair of inviting eyes,—the clasp of clinging white arms, or the charms of a fetching figure! Do you not know this upstart will surely play the game out herself! Remember,—'tout lasse—tout passe —tout casse!'

"A dignified silence is your only attitude—and—your silent moral protest is your only weapon!"

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With some alacrity, the good-hearted Prince suggested to the venerable patrician lady, a gathering up of the rosebud aristocrats of the province, "Surely some one of the many great heiresses, the budding beauties would catch the wandering eye! Divert him,—do not oppose him!"

"Alas!" sobbed Madame Barbe. "He absolutely refuses to quit Khaminavatka! And—when I proposed a visit, he alleged that the dryness of the summer solstices was a fatal objection! He has presented to my dear boy a splendid Polish estate, the very gem of Volhynia,—and—I dare not openly anger him!

"He will not leave his harvests, he says. And—he has directed Wassili to go and make acquaintance with his Volhynian domain, instead of coming to the usual family reunion at Khaminavatka!"

"There," entreatingly, said Youresief, "You see that his heart is all right! He will not neglect your boy! And," the old veteran said with caustic brevity, "from what I know of the eternal laws of human variance, his harvest of wild oats will soon be all gathered—surely before next summer!"

But, like Rachel mourning for her children, the dispirited old dame refused to be comforted. She sought out a particular icon of unerring efficacy and mingled heart-felt prayers for the opening of Serge Dumont's eyes—with sundry soulful petitions as to the early removal of the woman who had blackened his fair fame.

Prince Youresief returned to Bobrinetz to find several appealing letters from Princess Vera Orbeleff now anxious to play the rôle of ministering angel, through the Marechale de Noblesse and Madame Cherikoff, but, the knowledge of her thinly veiled relations of intimacy with the scheming General caused Youresief to coldly reply that the incident had received a drastic official treatment,—and—that he was powerless,—and had decided to interfere no more!

That spirited court beauty raged when she received this placid rebuff,—as well as Barin Serge Dumont's glacially polite note declining to discuss the matter.

"As you remarked on your last visit, Madame la Prin-

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cess," he wrote, "I have found the means here to avoid loneliness! As for my future relations with the hostile clan—I will hold off my hand no more!

"I am absolved from all my promises to you,—and to Prince Youresief! The man of that Radovich blood who crosses my lines, with hostile purposes, dies in his tracks,—for—I shall now treat them all—as common marauders—all—save young Ivan, who is an honorable soldier,—a fair enemy,—and—a gallant fellow!"

While hundreds of happy peasants toiled harvesting the golden grain of Khaminavatka,—the married lovers every day relaxed their precautions!

Custom and their growing sense of security, due to the effective guard, caused them to dare more and more the curiosity of the now sullenly apathetic underlings!

For, surprise, wonder, astonishment had been all exhausted in their different gradations!

With a sly tenderness, the happy husband depleted the treasures of the nearest towns to adorn the secret nest of his beloved!

And, only the warning voice of the watchful Xenia was now lifted to remind them that they did not live in an enchanted Paradise!

The newest books—the latest music,—all was done that a yearning fondness could provide as a compensation to Magda—for the lack of freedom of movement!

Her husband had frankly told her all,—even the death of the black-browed Colonel Milovitch! "I can see that my father will soon retrieve her fortunes through the General," she murmured, "and then my mother will be able to realize her dreams of a winter in Paris and at Nicè.

"When all the clouds are lifted, Serge," she fondly cried, "my father and brother Ivan will be the first to forgive—and then—the General, who always loved me—can easily propitiate my mother!"

"Ah! Beloved lady bird! My own darling!" murmured Serge, as he stooped and kissed her slender hands now gleaming with his love offerings, "I could placate your family—at once,—through Youresief! They would be but too glad to drop the burned out feud—but,—it is

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the dread displeasure of the Czar,—revenging the Tzaritza, which would crush both us, and, our dear friend,—Father Adrian!

"Wait—wait—my own beloved—till next year!

"The memory of your appointment, the story of this abortive raid,—the whole affair, will have been dismissed from the minds of the envious court officials!

"How easy next season for me to smuggle you safely over to the Austrian frontier!

"And—the—story of your wandering away in illness,—the capture by strolling gypsies,—the holding you for a reward or ransom,—and,—my discovering of you—on my travels, through knowledge gained of my possessions and prominence here—will enable me to claim you openly as a wife!

"Prince Youresief discreetly informed, then—(for he must be charitably hoodwinked) can obtain a full permission of the Czar for me to marry you!

"In this way my rank,—my retired army privileges,—our estates all will be preserved,—and—a new marriage will only double our happiness!

"So,—Father Adrian will be held harmless, for all he knows he will know from your confession and my own! He comes to us soon on a visit,—and,—after our confession,—he can be entrusted with our whole secret! Remember—that without your baptismal papers and all the due legal formalities, I can not give you my rank, and, the legal titles to your future property interests! For that,—the Czar's permission and sanction of our union is absolutely necessary! But,—a wife you are until death parts us!"

To all these rosy views of a golden future, beautiful Magda Dumont gave the seal of her approval with softly shining eyes dewy with happiness!

She became again her light-hearted darling self, and, in her own person, played many an artful ghostly prank as the White Lady of Khaminavatka!

In vain, did the untiring Xenia remind her of the desperate chance which had alone saved her in the park, on the night when Anton crept up,—with murder in his heart!

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Secure in her husband's sheltering presence, Magda, counterfeiting Xenia's well known garb,—or as the ghostly White Lady,—braved a dozen accidental rencontres in the park!

True, in her ghostly character, the waving of outspread arms caused the dallying lovers or the belated toilers to flee in mortal terror. As a false Xenia,—she was always veiled!

It was to Serge Dumont that the anxious Xenia poured out her soul in vague forebodings! "You are both love blind, Barin!" she repeated. "Beware of the unexpected! The devil never sleeps!

"Some envious peasant, mistaking her for me, may even do her a grievous bodily harm,—your heart would be broken then!

"Some bold village hunter, trusting to a silver bullet, may hide himself and have a shot at the witch!

"Any discovery would be at once reported to the Radovichs, now humiliated to the very earth! And—then—they would turn on you like wolves!

"The General is as cold and unpitying as a hyena,—there is that Princess Orbeleff—she loved you! Nay! Do not deny it! The same hot and restless woman's heart beats under silk and lace, as under the peasant girl's serge gown! I saw her sneering bitter face as she bade you good-bye. That beautiful woman dreamed of reigning here.

"And she thinks that I bar her way! And,—I—am I not still the one time serf girl,—the peasant born,—even if you cover me with rich dress?

"But—one thing has ennobled me!" she said, with flashing eyes, "your darling Barina has called me sister! It was when her head lay on my breast, in that gloomy crypt,—yonder, where your brother lies!

"Now Barin, Lili Radovich is every inch a woman! She was Colonel Milovitch's bond slave! And she knows who sent him to his death,—who sent her out to exile,—and,—who has made her home only a police barrack!

"She will hate you to her dying day! She is a tigress robbed of her mate!

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"Baron Alexandre and the General would gladly denounce you for kidnapping the Tzaritza's Maid of Honor —if you are discovered!

"And then—General Ratzo and Prince Youresief would be forced to be witnesses against you! Barin! You know how hard our laws are! For God's sake——watch over your wife!

"For, a discovery means only death—and ruin for all,—for me—prison—perhaps, Siberia!"

Serge Dumont was ashen pale as the poor woman who lived in a pillory of shame for him, sunk on her knees! She moaned.

"Oh! God! Here is Arcady! A weaving spider! If you could have seen his creeping, gloating ways—as he dragged poor Anton down to be his tool for a few roubles! He breathes lies, and—murder is his follower,—cold, treacherous, cowardly murder! It is he who will avenge!

"He will come back—for—to Baroness Lili he will go—she must give him money and help!

"Be warned—for when the crash comes—you will find the whole world arrayed against you! Fear the mighty Czar! You know his anger would ruin you—and—Madame Barbe and the young Barin Wassili!"

And, her voice broke into wailing sobs as she knelt before him in supplication!

The young Lord of Khaminavatka was brave, and hardened to external danger—but his heart shrivelled in a sudden terror, at the outcome of any fatal discovery!

While he raised and cheered Xenia he was haunted by her words, "Arcady is a weaving spider—and,—he will come back!"

The simple force of the woman's home-bred logic was unanswerable!

The loverless Lili, the fugitive Arcady,—there were two mad wolves on the trail—and—only a spark was needed to demolish his rosy embowered fortifications!

"I will send for Father Adrian," he mused, "and, take counsel!" There was, too, the gallant Captain Milanoff, a continual guest, in the chateau—and, young and ardent, if the hot-headed youth should fancy, in his idle

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curiosity, to accost the supposed Xenia,—or encounter the White Lady,—then—he had known the face of the missing Day Star!

The whole hidden menàge was now resting upon a volcano—and,—once detected—the seducer Milanoff's fate, and Arcady's presumption showed that even the provincial officials held absolute ruin in their power!

Serge became very careful, going out only alone—leaving Xenia, again, the careful watcher over the hidden marriage bower!

While the young husband's bosom was torn with vague alarms, in a log cabin, at far away Petrozavodsk, on the chilly shores of Lake Onega,—a hunted haggard figure,—Arcady Radovich, awaited the arrival of his two brothers whom he had summoned, with sinister menaces, to a secret conference!

His money had been nearly exhausted,—his clothes were in tatters and he had braved a thousand dangers since he sped away from the terrified Madame Cherikoff.

Poor old Moschka,—peddler, thief and pander,—despised jew outcast, had been loyal enough to obtain for him a passport belonging to a dead merchant for the ruined nobleman, and, while he and Anton were haled away in chains, Arcady, selling his horse at Cordova, had stealthily journeyed through Podolia to the Dnieper, where, clad in a greasy merchant's garb, he had, safe in his disguise, slowly ascended the Dnieper to Kiev.

Thence, hiding with the declassée merchants in the Bazaars, he had made his way at once over the frontier at Woloczisk, and through Austria and Germany to Dantzig.

It was easy for him to reach Wiborz in Finland, and—from there, he journeyed up through Lake Ladoga and the canal to the little squalid town, which was his point of departure for Archangel on its estuary of the White Sea!

Thoroughly desperate, he now proposed to force from the two brothers the means of comfort in the long winter, until he could reach Baroness Lili and join his forces of revenge to the sworn hatred of her heart.

On the long journey up the Dnieper, he had no eyes

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for the varied beauties of the whispering forests and the blue hills crowning its lovely shores!

Every minor official was now a terror! He knew that he had basely betrayed Anton and Moschka to a lifetime in chains!

If Anton should tell all—there was Siberia before him—if detected—and,—starvation lurked in the future, when his few hundred rouble notes were gone!

Enfeebled and dissipated,—broken in mind and body—he lay among the greasy throng on the deck in the hot summer nights, glad to be hidden by the motley company.

The blazing days, while moving over the glassy waves, were a torment to him! He saw not the graceful picture of the fringing flower-decked shrubs throwing their soft shadows into the deep cool grottoes of the majestic river!

The silver stars reflected in the blue depths only recalled to him nights of by-gone years, when, with youth and hope as happy guides, he had made pleasure voyages on the great arterial stream, with patrician women hanging fondly on his impassioned words!

A storm of agony was raging in his restless heart, and he welcomed the wild nights when the tempest broke and the lightnings lit up the wind-rocked forest, and the Dnieper, terrible in its anger, lashed its sculptured shores. But he mocked the bitter storms in his agony.

He had drunk in all the dreadful memories of his crime-poisoned past, and, had, at last, slowly formulated a scheme to ruin his two brothers, or bend them to his will! "There is Baroness Lili,—the devil's own daughter,—and,—Ivan,—for the estates would come to him!

"I will threaten these two men who have so coldly abandoned me to starvation or prison,—to suicide,—or a pauper's grave!"

He gloated over the power which had been given him by Fate, to even in his disgrace, effect the utter ruin of the men now enriching themselves at court. For, he had determined to make them pay to the uttermost farthing!

In a little tea house, by the lake shore, boasting one private room reserved for exceptional villainies,—Arcady Radovich, the nobly born, in tatters, awaited the two

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brothers who had hastened from Petersburg, clad in plainest garb, to face the desperate man who had so long dragged their family down.

But, too well, the startled General Andrè and the cowardly Baron, knew the need of obeying that furtive summons!

For, Arcady's letter, veiled in its terrible menaces, told them how defenseless they were against him!

The last fifty roubles remaining to him, had paid for a special messenger to find out Baron Alexandre, whom Arcady rightly judged to be the weakest in nerve and resisting power!

"There is Princess Vera—you know her cold heartlessness,—she shall know all,—and you will then both be her bond slaves forever! I shall send letters which will reach Lili, too, at Ulitza—and,—she will know how you have sacrificed me!

"As for myself, I will unveil the whole past,—if I am arrested,—and,—both of you will share my ruin!

"You have something to lose,—I,—nothing! And—I demand comfort and protection! You must bring money,—you must help me on to Boris at Archangel—and provide through him, for my comfort in the long winter!

"There I am safe,—only, when there—for eight months no one comes there from Petersburg,—there is no mail,—no telegraph!

"And—next summer I can go away to the continent or join Lili at Ulitza! Choose now between your ruin, or my silence! For, you must pay—and—I will be to you—just what you make me!" They both knew his iron nerve when enraged!

The meeting of the three brothers was a stormy one, but even the hardened General Andrè felt the desperate energy of the half-starved man's terror. In rough frankness, Arcady brutally recounted the failure of his descent upon Serge Dumont's chateau.

When he had finished his insolent demands,—there was a storm of anger, and, in the little hovel, the tragedy of Cain came near a reenactment.

"Damn you!" yelled Arcady, "I have prepared my-

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self for vengeance! I have left three letters, one for my nephew Ivan,—one for Baroness Lili,—and one, with a full confession, incriminating you both in Pierre Dumont's murder, with the only one whom I can trust, the last faithful woman, who will deliver them, if I do not write her from Archangel before the inlet freezes!

"When Youresief and Ratzo get this last letter, you will both be dragged down! So—I fear you not! You would kill me,—betray me,—shut me up in an asylum!

"Do your worst! I dare you both! It is only for Lili and the boy that I've given you this last chance! Do you think I did not feel my misery hiding like a dog in Kief, the holy city, where I have been the Governor General's guest?

"Look to yourselves! I want clothes,—supplies,—post horses,—and a trusty guide, as well as money! Did you bring the ten thousand roubles?"

It was the secretly raging General Andrè who bitterly replied, "We will provide all, when you get into the post tarantass, you shall have five thousand roubles down—and,—an order on Colonel Boris for the rest!"

"Good!" grunted Arcady. "One thing more. I want arms—I may meet my other brothers—the wolves!" he sneered. "And, I will trouble you both to write a frank full letter to Colonel Boris Radovich stating that our joint family interests make it necessary for me to spend the winter at Archangel—and that I am to be treated—'as a voyager of distinction.

"You can get me some good furs and clothes here,—I will await you! I would like to leave to-night—as I dare not show my face!

"Once up there—where Boris is king, he can issue me a passport under a name which will hide my lofty relationship!"

Under the veil of the shadows of night, the victorious Arcady sped along through the darkling forests while the two brothers returned by the canal connecting the two lakes to the Neva. "If he were only dead," growled General Andrè—as they saw the satisfied brute disappear. "He at least, has spared us," said the weak-minded Alex-

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andre, "and has not posted down to disgrace us on the Danube!"

"Ah! Wait! Next season that devil will annoy us! I know him!" sternly replied the General. "We must ignore his very existence—for—there is Youresief and Ratzo—and this firefly witch Princess Vera!

"If she knew that we were hiding him, all our money operations would soon be at her mercy! The only thing to do is to put all he grinds out of us as an extra profit on the Government contracts for extra expenses! It is better as it is! If Youresief had caught him—he would surely have betrayed us! I can write Boris a secret letter to beware of him!"

While they plotted to undermine their brotherly blackmailer,—Arcady, lying at ease in his tarantass, wrapped in furs and reclining on softest cushions, watched the gloomy fir trees fly by.

"I need young Ivan as the hand to strike Serge Dumont to the heart! He is young—impressionable! He is wax in the hands of Princess Vera!

"She hates Dumont for the disgrace of his preferring that voluptuous devil Xenia to her Frenchified charms! She will never forgive the cold scorn and neglect of her offered affections!

"I can reach her! She will delight to have Andrè and Alexandre in her power! I will promise her all things. But she must work Ivan up to a fury. She can tell him that her enemy—my enemy—cast disgrace and exile upon his mother.

"And—that this victorious Lord of a Kherson harem has hidden his only sister away to minister to his pleasure! And,—that will do the business! Once that Ivan is persuaded that Magda is hidden there, then,—he will strike like the eagle of the Caucasus! Ah!" He leaned back with a delicious sense of coming triumph!

"Voila l' affaire! If Vera will only fascinate the boy! Next summer, Ivan will be a captain and have his leave all summer! He is free to return to the old home!

"Vera can hoodwink Andrè and meet the handsome youngster there! Between them, if she is really hidden there—then—they can find her—and—then—then—

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Dumont is crushed,—ruined,—disgraced—his estates would be confiscated,—if not—Vera can egg Ivan on to kill Dumont—and,—both she and I will be doubly avenged!

"She will gladly pay the price to show Serge Dumont, this French popinjay—that a Russian woman's heart never forgives a slighted love! It will work! Ca ira!"

He rubbed his hands in glee. "And—she—a thorough paced one,—she can help to smuggle me back—if I can be on hand to see the job done! For, I will stand yet with my foot on that dog's dead body!" He drank himself into a sufficient fierceness of purpose and fell asleep, wondering if Anton Antonovitch had intentionally deceived him!

"Fool that I did not go with him that night. If it was really Magda—I would have borne her off against hell itself." He had a hundred times cross-questioned Anton and could not shake the stationkeeper's stolid assertions that it was the face of the Day Star of the Dying Water!

"The dead do not return," growled Arcady. "I heard the scream! It was a lusty woman's voice! Fool that I was,—there I missed the vengeance of a life time! For, he would have sought for her across the river on his return—and—we could then have killed him easily,—on our own grounds—with the law on our side!

"But,—where the devil has he hidden her? The day will come when I shall know all, for I will work on this jealous spitfire Vera! I can force Andrè and Alexandre,—and—I shall be in at the death! Wait—wait—till the roses bloom again!"

And the black-hearted spider wove his mesh of crime and intrigue, even in his fevered dreams!

But, sobered up by the thirst for vengeance, he was careful at Perguba to send back his poisoned letters to Princess Vera, who long had owed him the heavy debt of having aided to cover her little amourette with General Andrè from the unsuspicious Madame Olga Cherikoff,—as well as to keep both the crafty lovers out of the power of Baroness Lili and Colonel Milovitch, the joint heirs of the shame of the border!

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"My lady will run straight,—because—she has to!" he cruelly reflected. "For—she knows that a word from me to her dupe, the Minister of War, would set her adrift! The old functionary would know soon that he is but a cat's paw—for Andrè and Alexandre to rob the Czar! So,—he laughs best who laughs last!"

And—while the far away Magda and her husband rejoiced in the disappearance forever of the one enemy whom they feared,—and Father Adrian blessed the summer harvests,—the keen-eyed Xenia, with sleepless vigilance, watched at every turn.

Even in her dreams,—the faithful woman, shuddering, murmured, "He will come back! He will come back! And—I must some day lay my life down,—to save the Barina! I will be ready," the sleepless guardian vowed, as she redoubled her vigilance.

Under the harvest moon,—the happy Serge Dumont drove afield, with the golden-hearted man who had now heard both the confessions of the two loving hearts whose very existence depended upon his keeping the sacred seal of sience! "We must wait—wait—my beloved Serge," softly said Father Adrian—till time and opportunity, and the favor of the Czar, will enable you to place your beloved wife in an open position of dignity, acknowledged station and safety!

"It is hard—hard to do the right—beginning in a wrong—but,—I can not see anything but heart break should a premature discovery ensue!

"For the dear God's sake, keep safe watch and ward over your angel one! She is a pearl,—a blossom,—an opening rose."

The week of Father Adrian's visit had glided quickly away and he had blessed the harvest of Khaminavatka,—for the huge stacks of wheat now loomed up like golden forts upon the lonely sea of the steppe,—each diligently watched, for fear of fire.

The faltering cattle wandered content in the stubble, and the sheep eagerly sought the detached pools of the Dying Water!

The swelling haze of the August sun hung over the

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baking steppe, and, a welcome relief from the brassy skies was the cool blue star-spangled vault of night!

Boursakoff had marshalled all his village hosts,—paid off his alien laborers, and man and maid sought relief from the fierceness of that glowing ball of fire, the sun of the steppes!

The peasants, with an abashed humility, had seen Xenia attend the blessing of the unsurpassed harvests, and, seated at the side of her master, she looked out upon the assembled ex-serfs, singing their "Harvest Home" evening songs, before the master and his priestly guest.

And—a partial revulsion of feeling had taken place! For, even Anna Ivanowna, still secretly jealous, knew that Xenia had gone to confession when the ghostly father opened the family chapel for spiritual aid to the dwellers in the chateau!

"Could a woman who received the sacred absolution from the great priest,—a patrician born, be living in a mad disregard of all God's laws?"

The timid superstitious Russians feared to face this "poser," and—the oft-repeated taunt and jeer died away from these village babblers!

There were those who were mad enough to whisper that the Barin had married the beautiful villager, for,—at a grand midnight service requiem for the noble dead, —Serge Dumont had led Xenia, on his arm, robed like a Countess, and veiled in silver sheen, to the splendid chapel, where the village Pope and his acolytes aided the famed ecclesiastic of Kharkov—in the grand services!

No serf-born girl had ever knelt before that family altar, in all the varied past, and—at last the voice of calumny was hushed forever! Even stout Boursakoff silenced his pretty wife's astonished query! "It is the will of God! The Barin knows his own purposes! It is for us—to be silent—and, obey him!"

On the last night of his sojourn, Father Adrian calmed the gnawing fears of the young husband as to the safety of his idolized wife's womanly honor.

"I have deposited all the records and papers concern-

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ing your marriage, sealed, for the Archimandrite, in case of my death,—the Barina Magda also has a sealed copy!

"In all save the legal formalities, which affect rank and property descent, she is now safe forever as a wife. You can protect her future interest by transferring to her, in her maiden name, one of your great estates in Central Russia!

"Should your marriage be declared technically illegal, as to the descent of your estates, those gifts would be secured to her,—in any event,—for when all is over,—she has only to register it again in her new title, as your legally acknowledged wife! But,—one safe way seems to be open to avoid all clash with the majestic power of the Czar!

"You must continue to use all circumspection here, this winter! As soon as the spring opens,—you can easily smuggle the Barina out over the frontier. You can reach it in two days! Money will do anything—in such cases! Keep your darling secret from every one,—even from your sister and Wassili. They look to your property—perhaps.

"Then, send for Youresief to the frontier, say to Lemberg! You can then tell him all that you wish! Follow the fiction that Magda strayed away, half demented, and was taken over into Galicia by strolling gypsies!

"You, a travelling Russian noble, hear of her partial recovery—you visit her,—love follows,—and,—then—you must throw yourself on the Prince's generous nobility of heart!

"Tell him that you know this marriage would end the feud forever! Confess boldly that you have already —secretly, married her abroad! Then,—when he has obtained the due sanction of the Czar,—go to Dresden or Vienna and be formally married again, there, in the Russian chapel,—getting your usual papers at the Embassy. In that way—the past is buried,—your wife will be the dove of peace, hovering between the olden foes!

"I know that Prince Youresief has sufficient power over the two Radovichs to force their instant legal consent.

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"As for Madame Lili—she does not dare to enter into the affair.

"After you are married, travel for two or three years! You are young, rich, the years of romance are still with you!

"Everything cools off finally,—and,—as you return,—you will find the whole social situation at your mercy—for,—this powerful alliance will not be distasteful to either of the Radovich nobles!

"Wassili and young Ivan will fall into a warm friendship—through the golden link which has then bound the warring families!

"And—Madame Lili's excellent social manners will prevent her intrusion!

"Her husband is enriching himself, now, and—money will soon bring the smiles back to her face.

"I can work secretly with Olga Cherikoff in this affair! But one grief yawns before you—any premature discovery would expose you as a criminal kidnapper! Beware of every falling leaf here! You are dangerously foolhardy now!

"For—who but you would have dared to have brought your hidden wife,—the White Lady,—to the mass in the chapel, disguised in Xenia's well known robes! The simplest accident—and,—you are then, ruined forever!

"Then—they would all turn and read you!"

"Why not get out of Russia at once!" gloomily said Serge.

"And,—forfeit your estates,—your rank,—deprive Madame Barbe and Wassili also of their future property rights?" gravely said the priest.

"No! Time alone can soften the memory of the whole thing! The pretense would not avail! For,—the sharp eyed General,—that gadfly Princess Vera,—Madame Lili and all would at once raise the cry of 'kidnapping' and abduction!

"Next year you will have the situation at your mercy—but now—you are under the ban,—and,—so—watch—watch, and keep a continual vigilance! Of course,—I would gladly join with Youresief to save you—but—to what purpose! The strong hand of the Czar would

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crush you! By next year, the whole affair will have been coldly forgotten."

Standing in the superb drawing-room, ostensibly now Barin Serge's music room,—where the faithful Xenia spent her days on guard over the imprisoned Lady of Khaminavatka—Father Adrian spoke to Magda words of cheer, as he bade her "farewell!"

"Remember, my dear child," he manfully said, "should mere suspicion arise,—should any change be necessary—if Serge can bring you over to Kharkov,—I will see that you are hidden away, for the whole winter!

"Our religious establishments are practically impregnable! I could shield you, until he could arrange to smuggle you down the Volga to the Caucasus,—or over to Constantinople.

"But—with your continued prudence, next year, will see you a happy and acknowledged wife. Beware, though, of Arcady's wiles! He is only a scotched serpent! If he had been sent for a five years' internment at Irkustsk, merely as a 'detenu,'—I could go up to St. Petersburg, see the Metropolitan of Russia and—come home in three weeks with all the papers needed to complete your new status. But, only if his mouth was sealed,—I dare not now! You have a long winter before you! You must seek healthful occupations!"

And, then, the sweet-eyed wife, shyly murmured, "Serge and I will study Italian,—for our later tour,—our real wedding tour!"

There were diamond tears bedewing the eyes of the young wife as she saw, from her secretly-made loopholes, her gallant husband ride out as the escort of the frank-hearted patrician who had given up the world's splendors to wear the cross of humility.

When Serge left his departing guest, out on the brown sea of sun-burned steppe,—the priest passed on into the glow of evening skies,—his heart still yearning to the rash lovers, who had gaged their future, their liberty,—nay, perhaps, even their lives,—upon the continued keeping of that dangerous secret whose discovery would set the Kherson ablaze with a wild tumult! For, their

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golden happiness hung on a single event—the continued keeping of a dangerous secret!

As Father Adrian's eyes gazed out on the lonely landscape,—he felt the chill of the descending night! A smell of burning forests was wafted from the far north,—the fallow fields lay blackened and drear before him!

The steppe was silent, vast, and drear in its unbroken monotony, save where the Tartar grave mounds rose in a grim moniteur of the dead past!

As he crossed the boundary of the Dumont estate, the aromatic odor of the withered grasses and dead flowers arose from the still verdant pastures.

He passed scraggy wastes of gray scrub oaks,—his eyes rested on scattered villages—where behind the screened windows, homely moving shadows spoke of household cheer, and, in the descending night, the rich heart of an untiring nature seemed throbbing under his feet!

His life had seemed to him as dark and lonely as these silent wastes, but, a storm of tender memories now swept over him, half sweet, half sad,—as he thought with wistful affection, of the two devoted lovers left behind, restless in the sweet torments of love!

A great silver star swung up into the eastern blue and its pale distant silver ray spoke to him of the peace which awaited him, in far away Kharkof, where only the clang of the prayerful bell told of the gliding on of Time into Eternity!

He smothered the sigh which had awakened thoughts of an old dead love,—long buried in his heart,—and breathed a prayer for his fond disciples now bewailing his enforced departure.

Xenia's passionate protest, and Father Adrian's warning, sank deep into Serge Dumont's heart! "We must await the departure of the troops, darling!" he said to Magda.

"At the first snows—they will all be ordered away,—only the guard will be left across the river, and—then,—we can steal out on the steppe for frequent sleigh rides, both by day and night,—for, you can be muffled up like an oriental Mohammedan Sultana!

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"Then—we will have peace—and rest,—till the spring brings us our happy release!"

He fondly hoped that every day was now bringing oblivion of the past,—a deeper quiet wrapping all the mystery of the past months, for,—a final search of the now dried up bed of the Dying Water had revealed no traces of the supposed drowned girl!

The active young Chief of Police at Bratskoe had also vainly searched the Bug's channel as far as Wosnescenk.

And, in his final report to Saint Petersburg, the sorrowful Prince Youresief had confirmed the absolute disappearance of the unhappy Day Star! She had dropped out of the minds of men already!

But, while the whole countryside turned to the preparations for winter,—to the varied business and pastimes of the idle autumn,—there was one stormy nature brooding with a growing bitterness upon the whole unsolved mystery.

With a sense of growing uneasiness, General Andrè and the Baron Alexandre had decided to keep Baroness Lili in the dark, as to the final disgrace and flight of Arcady.

A sudden regard for their own menaced safety caused them to conceal all from the Princess Vera, who had been so coldly rebuffed by the Marechale de Noblesse and Barin Serge Dumont,—the game which had escaped her slyly spread net!

As for that most unwelcome guest, Arcady—the brothers had written beseeching letters to Colonel Commandant Boris Radovich to keep the hare-brained fugitive strictly confined to the limits of Archangel!

"Once allowed to leave, roaming over Germany or stealing back to the Kherson—he will prove the final ruin of our whole line—and, effect our sure downfall!"

While this treacherous letter was on its way, entrusted to a special messenger,—the Princess Vera, seated in her rosy bower on the English Quai,—by the Neva,—studied long over a lengthy letter from Madame Olga Cherikoff at Bratskoe!

The good lady had poured out all her woes to the brilliant court intrigante. There was no detail of the whole

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affair which did not reach Princess Vera duly magnified and with a fringe of surmises and womanly suspicions attached.

"You have an influence over the General, dearest Vera," wrote the gentle widow. "I am here as the guardian of his estates, and I expect to end my days here!

"The old feud would have ended years ago,—but for Lili's dissolute pranks,—Milovitch's schemes,—Arcady's vile descent from an honorable life to unutterable baseness, and,—Baron Alexandre's long played rôle of 'le mari complaisant!'

"If the old line is to be saved, neither the husband nor wife must come back to the Dying Water,—as for Arcady,—we would be exposed to the shame of him being dragged away in chains! There is but one—who can retrieve the family honor!

"To Lieutenant Ivan will naturally descend all of the General's estates—and—alas,—since darling Baroness Magda's death,—the domain on the Dying Water.

"He will be promoted to be captain this winter!

"Let him come down next year and handle the home estate.

"You can come here—when the General comes—and have the Barin go and join his troublesome Lili at Ulitza!

"We can rally all the country noblesse around young Ivan,—and—placate even Barin Serge Dumont,—who has visited me,—and spoke of Ivan—as a gallant and a rising soldier!

"I leave it to your tact,—your grace,—your charms, to bring this all about,—and,—to build the foundations of a lasting peace!

"For, if the Excellence Serge Dumont does not marry,—then young Federoff becomes Lord of Khaminavatka, and,—these young men, after their duel—are already friends at court,—for no factious quarrels can disturb the Garde à Cheval—and—the matchless Preobajenskys."

The dashing court beauty laid aside this letter and read over, with knitted brows, the exasperatingly confidential letter of Arcady—the tempter,—who knew just enough of her heart to excite her jaded nature, with visions of new

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conquests—and,—a stronger hold upon the two rich estates which she leaned upon to secure her future.

Arcady's artful words touched the sore spot in her heart!

The scorning of her splendid charms by Serge Dumont for the coarse embrace of a too willing village serf-bred beauty. "You, Lili, and myself can work together, for Ivan has a fearful account to settle—one he knows not of yet!"

"It must be Magda," mused the Princess. "What does this devil know?"

All the sudden changes of behavior in Youresief, Dumont, and the two nobles at her side, showed that she had been ignored—and,—hoodwinked, to the utmost!

"You can absolutely control my two brothers through the Minister of War," frankly wrote the unabashed scoundrel.

"Now—they will lay a trap to keep me at Archangel—actually a prisoner, while they rob the Czar and fill their pockets! You—and I—will then be dropped—together! But,—I shall outwit them! I know their secret orders to Boris will follow me on—to hold me there—till next spring,—cooped up at Archangel!

"Now—if you but work with me, the last boat which leaves Archangel this winter will take me away to Denmark, Sweden, or Norway!

"I only wait to cash the order for five thousand roubles which they are to send! I may winter at Wisby! You can run over and meet me at Stockholm in the early spring—no one will miss you for a week! And,—now to give you the whole game!"

The hardened woman of the world dropped the letter with burning cheeks, for—the ensnaring of young Ivan was to her like a slaughter of the innocents!

"And, yet," she rose and studied herself long in the glass! "Ivan is twenty-five now,—I am thirty-three,—can I hold that youth's imperious fancies! Age bends—where youth tyrannizes!"

A memory of her forgotten readings told her that Diane de Poitiers was forty when she enslaved Henry II. of France, twenty years her junior.

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She was forty-eight when her unfaded charms won her the proud title of Duchesse of Valentinois, and—she held her kingly lover to her death,—spending the evening of her life in her magnificent palace at Aret!

"And,—can a Russian woman not match a French Madame? There is nothing impossible!

"I see my revenge,—a triple one,—on Youresief,—on General Andrè, who has hoodwinked me,—and,—on that vulgar dog Dumont! I shall rule the Kherson—yet.

"I swear it—for—if they do not pipe to my dancing—the Minister of War shall crush both the brothers!" Arcady had disclosed the fatal secret of his power—in his menacing words.

"Once out of Archangel, and, with money for my campaign, on a safe foreign soil—they must protect me—these loving brothers of mine—or I will betray them! All I ask of you is, to bring Ivan to your feet, wait for me—then,—to feed your revenge to the utmost,—for, your cause is mine! Only answer me, Yes!—I will then work on my sister-in-law Lili to bring Baron Alexandre to her side abroad next summer! She will obey!

"I shall steal down, after I have met you in the spring, and—get back into the Ukraine, with her aid! For, I expect you to lead Ivan captive, and reign secretly on the Dying Water next year!

"You have only to teach your young pupil to deceive the cool old General! If you have not forgotten Ovid's arts of Love—or the whisperings of the undying Venus,—you can soon mould Ivan to be your blind slave!"

That night, Vera Orbeleff sent a note to the young Guardsman which brought him in haste to her petit souper! The frank invitation of a raffineé society queen was a command, and, all unsuspicious of the future, the brilliant boy soon stooped to the golden chains rivetted by these slender jeweled fingers.

It was not a month after this strangely peculiar rapprochement, that Vera whispered to her young cavalier, "Can you keep a secret, Ivan?"

The dashing Guardsman bent over the white fingers which he kissed, murmuring, "Try me—you will find me loyal to the death!"

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"You hope to be a Captain, next year!" the fair Delilah murmured, throwing her arms around him. "If you obey me—if you swear to keep my secrets from Alexandre and Andrè—I shall see that you are a Major, when the roses bloom again, on the Dying Water—but—you—and I—must be there alone—to receive your commission.

"The minister is madly jealous of General Andrè. He does not wish me to visit Bratskoe—but—if you will arrange for our summer visit, and, Madame Cherikoff wants it so,—then,—I can easily get a Major's commission from the delighted old boy!"

And—far away—domiciled now as a comfortable denizen of Archangel, Arcady Radovich laughed to see his marionettes move,—even though the strings stretched out to the Frozen Gulf of Dwina!

"She is a rare one, a silken plumaged falcon,—and—she has struck her game! Lili, too, has now been ranged on my side, for she will keep my secret,—her soul thirsts for revenge! I will now prepare to slip away and leave Boris to dance in the silk stockings!

"The draft is paid! We have had a song of love—long enough under the stars of the steppe,—let us now sing a song of hatred—of a revenge to the death!"

And, wondering at a dearth of all Petersburg news, Serge Dumont, estranged from his sister and nephew by the supposed glorification of Xenia, forgot all troubles in the heaven of Magda's eyes!

Only—the never-tiring Xenia waited and watched with sleepless vigilance—for, her olden peasant cunning told her that Arcady would come again! And—soon the spider burst his toils and fled!

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CHAPTER XIII.

A WATCHFUL QUARTETTE.—ARCADY'S RECRUDESCENCE.

With redoubled precautions, the happy bride and groom, still snatching a fearful joy, roved abroad on the steppe at night, or threaded the dense forests of the splendid park! The military cordon had absolutely excluded all persons from entering the pleasure grounds or the plantations. They were only too glad to avoid the too-ready trigger of the Cossack troopers!

And—so—no force was needed to exclude the villagers of Khaminavatka for the White Lady of Khaminavatka was now installed as the popular demon of the lonely steppes!

The consecration of the great park to the pleasures of the Master alone, still further protected the timid, shrinking fairy who concealed her laughing face behind the spectral robes so awe-inspiring to the peasants!

Only the truant lovers who had always before made secret trysts in the park, mourned the absolute forbidding of all profane trespass upon the patrician's splendid pleasaunce ground!

And two huge Danish wolfhounds which now accompanied Baron Serge in his rounds, were a new terror to the daring trespasser!

Feudal obedience by day—a superstitious fear at night kept even the boldest in check!

The troopers at the Radovich mansion were posted on the south side of the river alternately with the Khaminavatka guard, so that at night, the sentinels' call rang along the banks every half hour to where the cordon of Cossacks rode in a semi-circle, joining the guard in the courtyard, where four of Serge Dumont's trusty home Cossacks, armed to the teeth, watched day and night, each of the four entrances!

The stern young Baron, intent on cutting off all surprise, had placed a steel lattice, with a swinging door, at

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each stairway landing of the three interior corridors of the dome-like vault of the great palace of the steppes.

When he gave Xenia the duplicate keys to each door, he said, "There is no one but you or I can now enter these upper floors! Nothing but a storming party would be able to scale the interior galleries, and there is no other means of reaching us!

"This cuts off all sly eavesdropping—and,—preserves you from the envious spying of those who regard you as the Queen of the Steppe!"

The dense screen of flowering plants on the upper corridor gave to Magda Dumont, a protected, covered way for exercise and an easy access to Serge's own apartments, as well as the temporary library and studio, arranged above.

From Serge's window a slender filament of steel wire, invisible below in the gardens, led to the chalêt to summon the Master from his labors there, and another, openly swung over the courtyard, led to an alarm bell at the Intendant's bedside! There was no element of watchfulness and precaution now omitted! And—every loyal servant was on the watch!

These royal, witching summer months of stolen kisses had been the very Paradise of Serge Dumont's life. He had learned to fathom the sweet nature of his spirited and loving wife,—to wonder at her graces of mind and body—to watch the unfolding of Life's flower of Love in her gentle bosom!

Magda had been left ignorant by her husband of all the shameful history of the saddened past, and,—reared a stranger for twelve years to her own home circle, she regretted no one, save the brave headlong brother,—who had been goaded into a storm of passion, wrought upon, an innocent Othello, by Milovitch,—the mad Arcady, and the sleek, scheming Baroness Lili!

"If Ivan only knew how happy I am,—murmured Magda—one summer night. "Darling! It will be well with us at the last. He shall know all—he will be the bridge,—with Youresief, to bring us across the gulf which now divides!" And, the gentle wife, with softly dreaming eyes looked forward to her freedom.

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Serge had beguiled her loneliness with telling her all the old legends of his historic race! How a chivalric Dumont had first sought the service of the great Peter, and had followed him from Narva's defeat to Pultowa's glorious day,—how, through the reigns of Catherine I.,—Peter II.,—Anne—Ivan VI.,—the shifty Elizabeth,—the luckless Peter III., and the all-conquering Catherine II., the courtly French emigrés had thrived, rescuing from the whirl of the French Revolution, the last of their Gallic kinsfolk who had ridden back to Paris, after Waterloo!

Stories of court and camp,—scenes of his own daring soldier days in Turkestan,—in the romantic Caucasus,—and of the terrible siege of Sevastopol,—all the quaint family legends of the chateau on the Dying Water,—these were a Romaunt de La Rose,—told by loving lips,—punctuated by burning eyes,—flashing love into the tender eyes which drooped their silken lashes when the burden of the story was one of sadness!

And, other occupations claimed Magda Dumont's time!

It was Xenia who taught her all the wild folk lore of the mystery loving peasants of the Ukraine! While Magda's fingers flashed over the pearl keys—the happy Xenia sang the songs whose under current of sadness reflects ever the throbbing tide of human loneliness, out on the pathless steppe!

As the months glided by,—the grateful young wife had set aside a portion of the day to improve Xenia's slender store of knowledge!

Her few years of life as the wife of a Post Station-keeper, had given her a knowledge of reading and writing—and,—of a singularly quick and resolute mental nature,—the devoted woman drank in the flood of learning now easily available in Magda's hastily gathered library,—the fruit of Serge's selections from the great treasures of the chateau salon below, where the marble busts of sage and philosopher gleamed down from the embattled bookcases.

And so,—even Xenia had learned to dream of the coming time when the Lord of Khaminavatka would be

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free to lead his bridewife away to storied Italy,—the Mecca of Russian lovers, where the sapphire sea washes the rocky breasted cliffs of Amalfi,—where Capri lingers far out at sea,—a blue island of the blest,—where Sorrento smiles in its never changing sunshine. And, with throbbing hearts, they all looked forward to their deliverances.

Love had kept pace with the changing seasons of this happy year, moving with the happy lovers on from the bud of hope,—the blossom of affection—to the golden fruition of their stolen Eden!

Spring, a filleted nymph with virginal bosom, had led them on to summer crowned with her imperial roses,—"the polished argent of her breasts laid bare,"—and, now queenly autumn in russet gown,—stretched her rounded arms over field and moor, in benediction of the ravished harvests!

What dreamy joys had thrilled them, in their future excursions over the campagna-like steppe in all its pride of early summer! The grandeur of the emerald wastes where once only the wild Tartar horses reigned, the greenish golden ocean of flowers,—the calm sapphire skies above lit by the glorious Sun God.

Tall waving grasses, veiled the nodding corn flowers where shades of blue and violet, of imperial gold and purple, were accentuated by the scarlet poppy and the gaudy tulips!

White oases of sweet clover,—lofty pyramids of yellow genista, and the spear-like fronds of the volunteer wheat, scattered by the chainless winds and the errant fowls of the air!

A thousand happy cries of hovering birds broke the impressive silence! The saucy goshawk towered above them motionless, the clank of the wild geese was heard afar,—mirages of gleaming crystal lakes enchanted the delighted eye, far above these spectral waters, the lonely hovering sea gull with slowly flapping wings swam in the thin blue air, wheeling from dark to light, in its airy career.

"Oh! ye steppes, how beautiful ye are!" murmured Magda, hidden by her husband's form, and only cau-

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tiously removing her veil, when he alone was driving the fretting Orloffs, and the green ocean of the steppe was spread out before them, broken only by the islands of the Kourganes!

"They also lived and loved, my Serge," the clinging bride murmured, as her Kherson-born husband told her of the majestic coffinless skeletons found in these historic tumuli, their food for the long journey stored in black pottery vessels at their feet,—sword and spear,—the Tartar bow,—the mouldered quiver—the crumbled arrows by their side,—and the bones of the faithful steed,—mingled with that of the knightly master!

Of the slender skeletons of women, Serge told her,—the marvellous bronze ornaments,—the silver diadems,—the crystal toques,—the strings of blackened Volga pearls, telling of beauty which had bloomed to brighten the lonely lot of the hardy kings of the steppe.

"We are but shadows, darling," sighed Serge. "Ships that pass,—phases, the shadow on the stream, for, there is nothing sure but change,—nothing inevitable, but, the eternal adieu! And, yet,—when we have passed away,—with those who have ridden out into the eternal night,—my ashes will thrill and quicken with love of you,—until the morning stars sing again!"

And, those summer nights,—nights when the heart of Nature could be heard beating beneath her unveiled bosom of loveliness,—when, clasped heart to heart, in the fragrant depths of the park where even the murmuring trees whispered of Love,—the lovers watched the silver moon sail in the enlarged vault of the expanded tranquil heavens, studded with God's silver stars!

Bathed in an ocean of perfume,—the cool air fanning their brows,—Love caught them in its magic meshes, as the Kherson nightingale melted their hearts in a tenderness inexpressible in words,—the surcharged ecstacy of a transported soul!

The silent forest walled them,—the deep pools of the park bore up the silver lilies,—the blossoms rained from the trembling trees, and Zephyr, the dainty handmaiden of night, kissed their glowing lips!

Solemn sleep wrapped the dreaming steppe,—the

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Ukraine's mystic spell was on them,—twinkling lights gleamed afar on either side of the Dying Water, the humble cottages transfigured by the silver rays of the pale moon!

Suddenly, drawn to each other, they trembled in an infinite bliss,—the thrall of love and the pain of love,—the exquisite happiness of a self surrender of heart and soul!

But, now the glory had departed,—the chill winds of the Urals were whirling the dying leaves from the heavy trees whose chronology was that of the long reign of the Dumonts. The shorn earth shivered in her bareness, and the mournful herds plodded slowly homeward from the ravished fields!

Under the mantle of snows,—the sleeping spirit of the Ukraine would soon hide until the cuckoo should call again, and the faithful stork wing back its dreary way across the Euxine, from where far Philae sleeps,—steeped in the eternal Libyan calm.

The long trial of waiting for the happy spring which would bring them a release from the fearful hiding day by day, from the Czar's anger, was awaiting the married lovers!

The dark days of storm and sleets,—the waiting autumn storm,—the white and ghostly winter, when the gray wolf alone was the unchallenged king of the steppe.

It was with tender forethought that Serge Dumont sent Boursakoff away to Odessa, to convoy the marvels of luxury, ordered through his agents to beguile the long winter months!

Serge's brow darkened as he recalled the silence of his sister, severe and formal in her old time codes of patrician hauteur, and the timid and perfunctory letters of Wassili Federoff, who had learned that the head of his house had given over the conduct of his whole life, to a bold-eyed daughter of the wild Ukraine!

Such life histories were but too common, with the proud men who were only a law unto themselves,—and Wassili,—pacing the halls of the Winter Palace,—in all the bravery of steel cuirass and silver helmet,—wondered how the man who had trodden the minuet with Princesses, in the White Marble Hall, could decline to

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the too facile conquest of a village woman's ardent heart!

But, young and inexperienced, the young heir never dreamed of a hidden queen!

The lonely days soon came down upon them! The steppe was now drear and deserted! The merry wandering toilers were all sheltered in their native villages,—the pilgrims were all returned from Kief and the far away Jordan,—and the gray-winged crows flapped their pinions ominously over the scarred and blackened prairies!

At night, ghostly fires gleamed out over the hardened globe, where the shepherds still watched their sheep, nibbling the last remnants of the vanished waving summer grass. It was the closing scene,—dark and solemn!

The autumn storms broke in fury, and—at last, the order for the withdrawal of Captain Milanoff's troopers came! It was in one sense a relief to the harassed Lord of Khaminavatka!

A continual double life,—a watchful espionage of his loyal military guest, had at last saddened him, as well as the silence of Prince Youresief,—the estrangement from his own sister,—and the mute rebellion of Captain Wassili Federoff, against the rule of that dark-eyed queen of the steppe Xenia! He was alone—left alone—with his secret love!

When Serge Dumont returned from escorting Captain Milanoff to Novokrainka, his heart was heavier than that of the village maids who followed the departing Cossack troopers with tear-filled eyes! He felt grim forebodings of some coming evil.

Breasting the driving storm, the Master eyed the far-reaching steppe, now an archipelago of detached lakes! The words of Matczewski returned to sadden him with their sober refrain.

"It is silent where these graves display their sad and lonely hillocks."

"It is gloomy and deserted in the tempest stricken Ukraine."

In his bosom he bore an urgent letter from Prince Youresief begging him to order his life more in accord

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ance with the demands of his rank and position! "The Governor of the Province,—the leading nobles, and—even the Minister of the Interior, have given me intimations as to the growing scandal of your present condition!

"As a retired Field Officer of the Empress' own Body Guard, you owe something to the dignity of the Imperial Patroness of the Garde à Cheval. When shall I hear of your marriage?"

The disheartened noble began to see how long was the road to travel when a right thing was being done in the wrong way!

Perfectly helpless, he was compelled to drift with the tide of events until the possible anger of the White Czar should be neutralized by time!

He too well knew the sullen attitude of his proud sister and his nephew, now a captain of the most resplendent and aristocratic regiment of the Russian Horse Guards!

His own honor was enmeshed with the mysteries of the long drawn out vendetta! And—he could not fight the growing calumnies, for

"A lie that is all a lie may be met and fought with outright,
But, a lie that is half a truth—is a harder thing to fight.

and, the bitter truth was as self evident on Russian steppes as by England's lawn-shaded streams.

"It is paying the price," he murmured, as he sped across the dismal prairie to where the heaven of Magda's bosom awaited him!

"If trouble comes," he prayed, "God grant that it fall on me—on me, alone!" for, a sinister foreboding now filled his mind.

All his summer friends seemed to have abandoned him, even the Princess Vera, whose last letter, filled with its raking sneers, had been vindictively torn up and scattered to the four winds!

"At any rate," mused Serge, with a smile, as his spirits rose, at the sight of the chateau, "we will have a tranquil season, for our study of Italian!"

Beyond—an occasional visit to the village pope,—one

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—of deferential courtesy to Madame Cherikoff,—and a few unnecessary trips of generous patronage dispensing among the village merchants,—he had doomed himself to a social exile!

He was now, under the intimations of Prince Youresief, "in Coventry"—for the haughty boyars of the Kherson would scorn to visit a chateau where their high-born dames and imperious daughters would find a peasant girl wearing silks and laces aping her betters,—her neck decked with ropes of Volga pearl!

With an activity born of a sudden bitter mood, Serge Dumont suddenly excluded all his immediate household save Xenia from the chateau,—only leaving open the vast dining-room.

The servants were sent away into the great barrack-like offices on the south and east!

To the astounded Intendant, the now wily Lord of Khaminavatka, announced his intention of having the whole chateau redecorated! "I shall have ample time to study the refurnishing and changes, during the winter,—and I do not wish to be annoyed!" said the Barin, as he bade his faithful Boursakoff build a stout sentry box, at each of the four entrances.

When the whole chateau was equipped for winter with its double windows and storm doors,—Serge Dumont practically disappeared from the view of even his most faithful attendants! Even the butler and Tourko, the valet, were shut off by newly constructed doors and partitions to their dining-room duties, and their two serving rooms.

"It is the beginning of the end," mused Nicolas Boursakoff. "Our Barin is going mad,—for these proposed decorations and splendors mean but one thing,—marriage!"

He confided to Marika his sinister views as to Serge Dumont's sanity!

"If I only dared to warn Madame Barbe Federoff," he faltered, but, mindful of a stern catechising by that irate dame, he went sadly about garnering the huge supplies for the long winter,—preparing the mountains of rye bread—the stores of varied rations, and, housir-

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the herds and flocks,—as well as executing his varied duties in the disposal of the wool, pelts, and hides,—the threshing out of the grain,—the stowage and winter repair of the machines, and the preparation of the garrison-like establishment for the silent frozen months.

He soon forgot the eccentric vagaries of his wayward master, in the anticipation of a blessed visit at his once comfortable abode, for the grandfather of the storks had chosen Boursakoff's roof tree as his perch, and, Marika, softly smiling, was thinking of the time when a tiny voice should be uplifted in her own little home where ease and plenty reigned, and, which love had blessed. And, so all eyes were dropped before the resolute and gloomy master now!

There was now a safe way found for Magda Dumont to aid her husband in the first thorough examination of all the varied wealth of the long unused chambers of the great chateau!

The lonely widower life of the dead Pierre—the sudden death of the old housekeeper Chuchinka,—and the estrangement of Barin Serge, with that severe moralist, his sister Barbe, had left the young heir absolutely ignorant of all the accumulated family treasures.

Only the library was marshalled ready for use, but, it was reserved for Magda Dumont to wonder at the heaped up riches so jealously guarded by the faithful old nurse.

The memorials of all those dainty patrician women now sleeping in the crypt of the family chapel, awaited the reverent hand of the hidden young beauty, who wore only the shadowy honors of the White Lady of Khaminavatka!

And, so Serge, with his darling at his side, room by room, explored the history of the vanished ones whose hearts had throbbed in the varying passions of a stormy life, under the roof of the old chateau!

For, out on the lonely steppes—human nature becomes simple,—passionate,—pathetic,—antique in its unrestrained play of tidal feeling sweeping away all the petty restrictions of court cabals and drawing-room etiquette.

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Faded robes which had clung to the quivering forms of the dead beauties, quaint old jewels, laces and brocades of la Directoire,—boyar costumes of Byzantine magnificence, uniforms blackened with the smoke of battle,—stars and swords,—the sabre of the brave, and beauty's fan, dropped from dying fingers,—over all these, the lovers lingered together, with a tender solicitude!

It was in the caskets, still fragrant with the faint perfume of flowers faded generations ago, that Serge and the White Lady found the letters which told, in the graceful self surrender, of a frank love,—the heart history of his gallant race!

With kindling eyes,—they opened the whole Treasury of the Past—to give a last generous heartthrob to the tender lovers who had now all wandered away into Shadowland!

And so—together—they read the story of the beauty who had once braved a princely father's wrath, to hide with her lover in the very stronghold of Love where Magda Dumont now held her court surrounded only by the fairies.

"They were happy—at the last,—Serge," murmured Magda, as she stole away from the jealously guarded relics, an old medallion portrait, wherein her shadowy sister's lovely wistful face still glowed out in fadeless beauty.

And so—their days went calmly on—until the gloomy festival of Dimitri's Saturday brought the peasants to the graves of their dead, with their rude devotions to the manes of their ancestors.

After October twenty-sixth, it was useless to dream of further excursions in the park, now leafless and bare, —there was before them, only the dark gray of the storm-blackened November and December, and the clear white isolation of the three first months of the year!

Both Serge and Magda eagerly awaited the white winter mantle of the steppe,—for then,—muffled beyond all recognition,—wrapped in Xenia's cloaks and furs, the hidden beauty could glide over the sparkling

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snows in her husband's splendid sleigh! She would be unrecognizable when wrapped in her shuba,—her head covered with the Circassian hood,—and nestling in his strong arms!

Then, the wild delight of facing the keen crystal winds of freedom awaited them both,—for peasant, pilgrim, and straggler were now all huddled in the villages,—baking over the huge masonry stove and lingering by the hissing samovar.

Barin Serge's new custom of visiting his Intendant's house daily in the morning and evening for the giving of orders and hearing reports, was the last step in the complete isolation of the lonely palace, now deserted by its once swarming occupants.

A revulsion of the hostile feeling toward Xenia, caused the upper members of the vast establishment to try to creep into the comely woman's confidence.

But, proof against all flattery, armed against all cajolery, Xenia went serenely on her way, serving her master with a dog-like fidelity, which touched all hearts.

Even the unlettered peasants saw the late bloom flushing the face of the young Juno who had been recreated by the power of example, and daily association with the two lovers playing their desperate game of hide and seek with the Czar!

The long absence of Arcady,—the rumor from St. Petersburg that Baron Alexandre had enriched himself with vast contracts—and would soon join his errant wife in Siberia for a splendid tour, à la Russe de mode, to Paris, was supplemented by the news that Captain Ivan Radovich had been granted a leave of absence for a year, and would personally superintend the two estates of his family in the Kherson, for both the Bratskoe and Dying Water domains showed now, sadly, the need of the master's hand.

General Andrè, moving up in the favor of the Czar, pushed on by an unseen hand, was now a power at court.

He little knew how many of his easily won favors were due to that bemedaled Numa Pompilius,—the Minister of War,—to whom the fiery-hearted Princess Vera Orbeleff was now a most tyrannical Egeria!

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It was this same ingenious court beauty who had obtained for Captain Ivan Radovich his leave, with the sinecure appointment of Inspector of the Annual Recruit Levies in Kherson, attached nominally to the staff of the Corps Headquarters at Kief.

The young lover, who saw his Majority now, within his grasp,—five years sooner than his very wildest hopes of promotion, was but too eager to hide from all his secret slavery of passion for Vera,—his every act following now the capricious toss of that pretty head!

"He, at least, shall not escape me," the dashing beauty murmured, as she calmed the varying moods of the enraptured youth.

"Don't you see, my Ivan," she whispered, "that even in Russia, we must regard rules and precedents! I have had you detached, so as to free you from the envy of your fellows, your promotion will come next summer!

"There,—among the roses of the Dying Water,—I will give it to you,—and only, you and I, must sway the family interests, down there! Olga Cherikoff will be an excellent sheep dog—for me—and,—you—will be left unrestrained, as the sole family representative.

"Should you retire, you will, in time, be the heir of both these estates, nothing will satisfy me but to see you the richest noble in the Kherson, and the Marechale de Noblesse!

"To effect this, I swear you to absolute secrecy, not one of your family must know! You would lose your good fairy—and I—" she dropped her head on his heart, "I would lose you!"

And,—as she drew him down to her breast, and made him drunken with the mad invitation of her burning eyes, she nursed in her heart the memory of her secret oath,—the dark oath of revenge,—the vow to effect the ruin of the man who, a King Cophetua of the steppe,—had lifted up a beggar woman, to scorn the invincible beauty of the Winter Palace!

"And—he shall know,—who dragged him down,—he shall at last, feel a woman's vengeance! No daughter of the steppe can strike deeper than the woman who

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walked at his side,—with a beating heart,—only awaiting his awakening!"

It was while Serge and Magda were busied with examining the Treasury of the Past that the Princess Vera Orbeleff received a sudden and imperative visit from the two brothers who ruled the house of Radovich!

Seated in her rose-hung boudoir, the Princess knew that events of moment had arrived. The Baron Alexandre was as pale as the sheeted dead,—and General Andrè—usually so calm—was in the fever of a violent passion!

A sudden fear shook the little intrigante's dauntless bosom! Had her conquest of Ivan been discovered? She rallied all her bravery to meet the impending attack! "They shall never have him!" she swore in her heart,—"for,—at my bidding, the old War Minister will topple over the house of cards that these tricksters are building!"

One specious story, interpolated with sobs and tears, of Andrè's insolent persistence in an audacious wooing would soon cut off the golden tide of Fortune! And—so—armed at all points, Princess Vera awaited the breaking of the storm.

Her surprise was superbly feigned as General Andrè bluntly demanded news of that will o' the wisp fugitive Arcady Radovich!

"You are a devil, Vera, for finding out the hidden,—every breath of scandal blows your way! Tell us, for God's sake, if you do know!

"There is a matchless diamond bracelet at Outchinikoffs! You shall have it—if you discover this madman's whereabouts!" Pushed on by the promptings of a merry devil, Princess Vera determined to save that bracelet and, moreover, not to betray Arcady.

For two weeks she had known of the whereabouts of the artful schemer who now secretly held the whiphand over herself, Baroness Lili, and her young lover Ivan! She had faithfully reported to the wretch, fretting at Archangel, every detail of the movements of both his friends and foes.

"You have lately kept me in the dark about matters in

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the Kherson," smiled the wily Princess. "Youresief is only an old bear. I lost Serge Dumont's friendship, for your sake—and, as for General Ratzo, he is a human hyena! Where is Arcady? I thought he was still lingering around the Dying Water, or else—visiting Baroness Lili at Ulitza! He is scarcely a welcome cavalier at court!"

"Cease your folly," growled Andrè Radovich. "We know our own business,—the history of that fool is the chronicle of the family shame! I see that you do know something—I can tell it, in your eyes!"

Princess Vera hesitated, and the softer tempered Baron Alexandre began to temporize!

"We had him all safe for the winter,—we thought," sadly said the Baron, "up at Archangel, with the Colonel Commandant Boris Radovich. We gave him comforts, money in abundance, a good winter outfit, and,—our orders to Boris were to let him do as he pleased—but,—to surely detain him next spring,—when the navigation opened,—as we want him out of the way!

"There is a general order in Kherson to arrest him, for that crack brained descent upon Khaminavatka,—but, it seems he has given Boris the slip and got away, on one of the last vessels! The White Sea is now closed—but Arcady is—God knows where! He will ruin us yet—with some mad escapade!"

"Am I to have the bracelet or not?" laughingly demanded Princess Vera,—teasing General Andrè with a glance of her wicked eyes!

"Yes! Yes!" shouted the excited man. "Well! I had sent my French maid to Paris to lay in my winter batterie de toilette, and, she only came back three days ago. At the Hotel Kasematte, in Hamburg, she met the Baron Arcady, resplendent in superb furs, who gave her an address in Paris to write him the general news of his beloved family!"

The General flushed under the woman's sneer, but eagerly listened. "He further wished a secret report upon me, and, all our plans for next year! He had just arrived on a swift German trading packet, and, he kindly gave my maid some valuable furs.

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"He boasted that he had made a wonderful speculation with buying the last stock of Siberian furs sent in, before the closing of the White Sea, and, he was, in fact, in the company of rich Hamburg Jew fur traders! My woman is faithful,—she told me all,—and—I can get the address and send it to you!" "Why did you not tell us?" growled the General. "Confidence for confidence, Monsieur la General," heartlessly laughed Vera. "You ignored me,—and,—now,—you come to me for help!"

"I have it," ejaculated the General to his alarmed brother. "I will write the Ambassador in Paris to send one of his secret police and warn Arcady to keep out of Russia,—on the peril of his life!

"Then,—he will probably work down the Danube to Ulitza, when his money is gone! You,—Alexandre,—can write to Lili to give him a few hundred roubles and keep him out of our land! Give up going down there! Write to Lili! She can handle him easier than any human being! Fools that we were—not to have Boris take away his passport,—have him watched,—and so prevent his stealing away as he did! Our money, too, gave him the means to make his escape!

"Send me the bracelet, General," laughed Princess Vera, "and I will send you the address!" And the young beauty nonchalently rang for her carriage. "What do you advise us to do?" doubtfully said the General. "We do not wish to be shamed by this wretch,—one whisper here of his doing—and,—we would be both ruined, in the eyes of the Minister of War!"

"I know that!" answered the provoking Princess. "I know that you are now both rapidly enriching yourselves! Let Madame la Baronne Lili travel alone in Italy this winter! She may need Arcady as an avant courier. You two should not separate! Stay here and watch over your affairs! Let Ivan go down and handle your estates next summer!

"I can get him a leave! You can either go to Finland,—or abroad,—and so—avoid Arcady! He is afraid of you—I know that! He fears the insane asylum! I will go down and spend two or three months with Mad-

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ame Cherikoff! I can easily twist old Youresief around my finger!

"And—Ivan can handle your properties! I can watch over your enemies—for—let me tell you—General Ratzo sent up a secret report to the Minister of Police, to be referred to the Minister of War!

"I heard of it,—Andrè, and, I had the pleasure of seeing it burned! I did that for you,—for old time's sake,—for I have broken your bread and eaten your salt! Keep away—all of you—for—one more such document would drop you both into oblivion! There were some very ugly surmises in it! I read it!"

General Radovich grasped her hands. "You are a pretty witch—and,—a teasing little tiger cat! You are right! I'll send Ivan to talk this over with you! Do you ever see him?" "Only at the Palace—on guard! He is a pretty boy!" yawned Vera, rising to go. "But, you see—you made a mistake to keep me so long in the dark! Only Prince Youresief can keep Ratzo in line—and—you can not sway the old functionary,—but—I can! So,—if you wish to follow my advice—no half confidences, Messieurs!"

She dropped a pretty curtsey and moved to the door of her dressing-room. "There will be earrings with that bracelet, Vera," hoarsely said Radovich. "Tant mieux, Monsieur!" she laughed, with a deep bow! "You will have the address—and—you can have the girl hoodwink your wild Radovich—if you wish! She will write him anything that I tell her! And—I will write him—and hoodwink him—myself."

When the brothers departed, General Radovich maintained a gloomy silence until they were rolling along the Neosky in their carriage. "You can see how wise that little fox is, Alexandre," he finally said.

"Write Lili to go and amuse herself, and for God's sake, to keep Arcady silent! I will give you money to send her! We had better both avoid the Kherson, until General Ratzo is removed or some favoring fate will relieve us of Arcady!

"Lili is just the woman to easily handle him! He

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fears her,—he will soon spend his money! He will work around to Ulitza.

"Just write her to humor him to use him as a kept dog, in sight—and—let him drink himself to death as soon as possible! Thank God! Moschka and Anton are far away in Siberia, and their lips are now sealed with the convict's gag of shame!

"And, I will flatter this little gadfly! She can really hoodwink and neutralize any official meddling of Youresief and Ratzo!

"For, two or three more seasons of such good fortune, and—then, neither you, or I, will care for any more money! Yes! Ivan shall go down and keep all in order! Not a single enmity is directed against him! She is a wise little witch!"

They drove down to the jeweler's and the General dispatched his peace offering to the sleek feminine Judas, who had already doubly betrayed them. And, both sides of the lying compact were well satisfied!"

On her afternoon drive, Madame la Princesse Vera Orbeleff was busied, when not returning the salutations of countless cavaliers, with dreaming over the queer mélange of warring interests in the Kherson! "I am to be the queen of the coming summer!" she smiled. "They fell easily into my trap!

"And, now, to handle Ivan with silken gloves! The others are already under my control!" For, the desired truth was not purchased by the glittering gems of Outchinikoff, the court jeweller!

The Baron Arcady Radovich, secretly smuggling himself on board a Swedish brig, laden with furs, hides, fish, iron caviare, and timber,—had duly arrived at Stockholm, where no landing passport was required.

His letter to Princess Vera from Wisby had announced his readiness to meet the partner of his vengeance, when the spring should bring their opportunity.

Provided with a passport easily obtained by Princess Vera,—his voyage to Ulitza and subsequent conquest of Baroness Lili, would leave him free to steal into Russia and join Ivan and the Princess on the Dying Water. And—then—sweet vengeance was his dream!

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It was long after Christmas before the anxious schemer received the answer to the letter which had filled Baroness Lili Radovich's heart with an unmeasured rage.

From Florence, the letter had slowly journeyed back to Wisby, and, the reply filled Arcady with a fierce joy.

Lili Radovich, burning to avenge the dead Milovitch, eagerly besought her wild brother-in-law to meet her at Nicè. A draft for a goodly sum of money accompanied the letter!

"Come to me,—there is danger in writing! I wish to know all! You can return to Wisby, and then, when summer comes, join me at Ulitza!

"I have to send to the Ukraine for many of my personal articles—as I shall surely remain absent for another year! You can easily go in disguised as a Serbian follower of the family.

"No one will know you, if you go over the Bessarabian frontier.

"But, be sure to bring a spurious Russian passport! You may need me! Princess Vera can easily get you one! And,—then you can tell me—what you say—that you dare not write!"

With a skilful malignity, Arcady had poisoned the mind of his guilty sister in law, as to her virtual abandonment by her family!

He painted the splendor of the life of Andrè and Alexandre at the court! "I, alone, can put them in your power—so that you shall have a fitting station,—a future life of luxury—and a following worthy of you!"

The Princess Vera laughed for very joy when she received the news of Arcady's sudden meteoric rise in the brilliant winter social skies of Nicè!

"He—with his still beautiful sister in law, was now, a marked feature of that restless suspicious Russian colony, which, there by the Corniche, drinks the pleasant cup of vice to the dregs!

And, now, Lili Radovich knew of the shameful hold which Arcady held upon her supine husband, and his tyrannical brother! The concerted murder of Pierre Dumont,—the knowledge of Princess Vera,—who had secretly withheld General Ratzo's report, and,—the dark

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suspicions of his mind that Magda Radovich—a living entity,—was the secret Sultana of Serge Dumont's palace of the steppe.

"Vera Orbeleff owes that brute a debt of vengeance,—you know what Milovitch was to you,—you owe him your lover's death,—your exile here,—on the doled out bounty of your pusillanimous husband!

"I owe to Serge Dumont the shame of being chased out of the Kherson with the Cossack's hungry sword behind me! And—now—if you will only aid me, the heavy debt shall be paid,—in due time! Aid me to return in secret! Ivan will be safe there alone!

"I will find out the hiding place where this pêtit maitre has hidden the wayward girl!

"You shall give me a letter to Ivan to tell him to avenge his sister's dishonor!

"For, by the God above I shall never breathe freely till I see that brute's blood flowing in expiation."

And, then he told the woman who still mourned Milovitch, night and day, of the secret attack upon the woman in the Park! "Had I gone with him, I would have, at once, recognized Magda—and,—so—dead or alive, borne her away."

"But, now—our vengeance will be complete,—dearer,—sweeter! For, with Ivan at my side, if I find them together, he dies!

"Even the Czar will pardon the red handed killing of a man who abducted his Imperial Consort's Maid of Honor! It is high treason,—Siberia,—forfeiture of the estates,—and a disgrace forever!"

"Why do you not drag him down instead of killing him?" anxiously demanded the vengeance hungry Lili.

"Because," answered Arcady, "it is only by a tour de force that we can catch them together—then—it is *our blood*,—or *his life!*

"For—the fellow is naturally desperate! He has the girl hidden there,—of course,—in the chateau—for, Anton swears to the face of Magda!

"The poor superstitious fool believes that the dead return!"

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"Alas! They do not!" sobbed Lili Radovich, in a frenzy of sorrow.

"For if the dead could come back,—Michel Milovitch would have been led by love from that lonely grave in the Caucasus,—to follow me to the end of the earth!"

"Arcady!" she cried, with desperate energy, "kill him! Follow him like a tiger! I will be your slave! You shall have money! I will do your bidding—and—Ivan—my brave boy—shall have my blessing, or else, have a mother's curse hanging over his head,—to blacken his days,—unless he strikes to wipe out this foul stain!" And, so the weaving spider knitted up his toils!

While the Lord of Khaminavatka and his beautiful wife became daily more careless in their movements,—lulled by the winter quiet and the isolation of the cooped up villagers,—Xenia, with a disturbed heart, walked the upper corridors of the old castle.

"If only Arcady Radovich were dead—or—deported to Siberia," she mused, "there might be less danger, but, the time of discovering must surely come!"

The peasant born woman knew the deep underlying cunning of the Ukraine,—the wild passions of the Danubian blood of their enemies,—and,—she recalled all the record of Arcady Radovich for stealthy wickedness.

"He will come back,—some day!" she shuddered, and, mindful of her midnight encounter, she always carried the keen Circassian knife in her bosom!

In her frequent sleigh rides with her master, she tried to keep him alive to a sense of danger, but, lulled to security, Serge Dumont was now steeped in his happiness, and lightly put her warnings by!

The only practical measures which she could force upon the Barin, were to alternate her rides with those of her mistress, and to exhibit herself ostentatiously unveiled before departure, to the lingerers in the courtyard!

The same furs, turbans, and veils transferred to the hidden beauty caused the disarming of all suspicions!

But, the Russian moujik has his own craft, and long before the Easter came around to release them,—with its mournful "Recollection Day,"—to commemorate the

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beloved dead,—an unnoticed accident had placed the secret of the vanished Day Star in the possession of one other than the three who fondly concealed it!

And, he, the sleigh driver,—low browed,—sullen,—cunning and brutal, was only restrained by fear from taking advantage of a secret in which he saw the means of future wealth!

An abject fear of violence at Barin Serge's hands, so far had tied the tongue of the cunning rogue,—half crazed with unsatisfied cupidity!

"I must wait," he muttered. "I must wait! The General and the Barin will soon come to Bratskoe! I know their people! There must be a way to get money,—and—to have no one suspect me!"

But, to no other soul on Khaminavatka's broad domain did the driver breathe the discovery,—the result of a sinister accident which happened long after the murmured tenderness of the voices behind him had led him to believe that another than the comely village woman possessed that flute-like voice!

And, while the Christmas and New Year's festivals were secretly observed, in joy, by the three prisoners of Love,—while the St. Petersburg season found General and Barin Radovich still mounting in state and splendor,—the watchful quartette of enemies were closing up the toils around the proud noble who was beleaguered by fate in that lonely Palace on the steppes!

Lili Radovich had already dispatched Arcady to his conference with Madame la Princesse Vera Orbeleff at Stockholm!

And, when these two separated, Arcady hastened back to join his crafty ally,—the discarded and neglected wife at Ulitza!

With true feminine slyness, she had surprised the two brothers by her willingness to remain another year on the Danube.

"Only I shall send two or three servants to bring with me all that I require for another year's absence!"

It was this embassy in the early spring which brought Arcady Radovich as a disguised traveller to the lonely mansion of his birth on the Dying Water.

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Sheltered there by the Intendant, he defied the careless supervision of the Russian Lieutenant in charge!

The crocus and daisies were starring the thin grass of the faintly dawning spring when Princess Vera, stealing away alone to Kief, met her young lover Ivan now detached for his year's service in the Kherson!

The two feudal lords in Saint Petersburg were as completely blinded as the young lovers waiting for the early summer to set them free!

While Serge Dumont was making his secret preparations for crossing the frontier,—Princess Vera, at Kief, gave to Ivan his first sinister suspicion!

"When you and I are alone on the Dying Water—I have a secret of deadly import to tell you!" she faltered. "But, not till you are wholly mine!"

And, then, the man who had a secret to sell, heard of the young officer's coming, and then laughed for very joy.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE NEW POST STATION.—A WOMAN SCORNED.

The long game of cross purposes in the Serbian family had ended with the coming of spring, and the two heads of the Radovich clan were secretly delighted at Baroness Lili's unexpectedly cheerful determination to remain abroad willingly another year!

A golden tide of fortune was drifting the General and the Barin bravely along. The lucrative contracts for horse furnishing and the army supplies in Little Russia and New Russia drifted, without competition, into their hands. General Andrè chuckled with delight, for he knew that the powerful Jewish syndicate to whom the brothers sublet their monopolies, were also making heavy secret presents to the War Minister.

Only the poor shivering soldiers of the Czar who received but a third of their real furnishings reviled this

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comfortable arrangement, but, the Princess Vera laughed in her sleeve!

The brothers had taken a splendid villa at Wiborg for the summer, and they had early dispatched Princess Vera to take up her station at Bratskoe, and secretly watch General Ratzo and Prince Youresief.

A dainty little fragmentary estate near Bobrinetz had been presented to the Princess by the doting War Minister, who had received it as a "bonne bouche" from the sly rogues heaping up pyramids of stolen roubles.

"You will now always have a little pied à terre, Ma belle amie," said the old Minister, "and if I should get tired of these greedy Radovichs, you will have a little southern nest of your own! I may go down next year to the Ukraine, and the Crimea," dreamily said the ancient voluptuary. "And,—of course—I should ask you to be of my party to Yalta!"

The hoodwinked brothers were equally delighted in Captain Ivan Radovich's orders to the Kherson,—and—the Princess Vera's secret mission. For, already there were murmurs in the Ukraine as to the vast interests gliding into the hands of the unpopular Serbian emigrès! The Russians of pure race secretly mutinied to see these interlopers, backed by the ubiquitious Israelites, gathering in the profits of nearly all the governmental contracts!

At the assembly of Notables at Elizabethgrad, the Prince Youresief sadly confided his sorrows to the hugely disgusted boyars. "What would you have!" cried one. "No one could make head against these greedy fellows, but Serge Dumont,—a natural born leader!

"There he is, steeped in the lowest humiliation at Khaminavatka! A beggar village woman, sleek of form and comely of face, has throned herself where our best blood has always reigned!

"I was obliged to omit the usual invitation to him, here, for even Madame Federoff, his sister, the head of the old aristocracy, has been forced to suspend all relations until this mad Tannhauser leaves his serf-bred

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Venus,—the cast off wife of a moujik post station-keeper!"

But, the others who had seen similar instances of self-surrender, many of them sadly culpable, in their own days of lawless youth,—merely grinned,—and—nursed their growing wrath against the lucky Radovichs!

At St. Petersburg, on the night before the Princess Vera's departure, General Andrè gave the sparkling witch his secret orders!

"I wish you to visit Elizabethgrad, Kharkof, Kief and Wosnescenk! Go over to Bobrinetz, see all the leading nobles,—placate Ratzo and Youresief,—you well know how," he smiled. "And counteract all influence raised up against us! Here is twenty thousand roubles, for pin money!

"Madame Cherikoff puts the villa unreservedly at your disposition! Invite gay company,—and—try to make us popular!

"You will see Ivan, of course! He will spend half his time at the Headquarters at Kief—and the other half at Alexandre's mansion, on the Dying Water!

"I'll write him to entertain you and your friends, handsomely. Aid him. He has all my secret instructions, but he is to be kept in the dark as to our relations! Remember, he is young, foolish and jealous! He has a brilliant career, if he is well handled!

"The Minister has hinted to me that he may soon be advanced to the grade of Major!"

"He will not suffer in my hands, General," said the pretty deceiver, with downcast eyes, and a peculiar smile. "I think that I know just how to handle him—and,—I will watch over him,—for your sake!"

"One thing more," hastily said the General, as he threw on his fur pelisse and grasped his sabre.

"Lili Radovich writes me that Arcady has suddenly cleared out of Nicè and gone to Alexandria with some wild fellows! She is fond of him! Thank God! He is off our hands! But, he is a queer devil! If he should try to steal back to the Kherson—notify Ivan at once,—he will send a courier to me!

"For, should the madcap appear, I've given Ivan or-

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ders to have our Intendants lock him up and hide him, till I can get an order interning him in an asylum temporarily!

"That would relieve us of any future responsibility for his past outbreaks or any further deviltry! For, when he is adjudged insane, no one would blame us for his freaks!"

"You are very wise, mon General," replied Princess Vera. "Count on me—you have chosen the right course!"

"As to Serge Dumont," hazarded the General, turning back at the door, after an ardent embrace which surprised the young beauty.

"Let him reign, with his kitchen beauty at his side!" sneered Princess Vera. "Why, even the easy-going Noblesse of the Kherson have ignored him completely—not for his vices—but for being such a fool as to publicly drag down the honor of an ancient house." The little Princess was severe as to offences against good taste!

A half an hour after the star-decorated and bemedaled General had driven away, Captain Ivan Radovich sprang up the stairs to Vera Orbeleff's rose-colored boudoir!

"I am told," he cried, as he folded her in his arms, "that the Minister has already spoken of my promotion!" He covered her bejewelled fingers with kisses. "I owe it to you! My own darling!"

"You will"—cried the blushing woman,—fired by her young lover's audacity,—and touched by his tenderness—"you will,—when you have earned it!" And she then drew his head down upon her breast. "I shall not say 'good by' to you,—even when you are a Colonel,—for,—I shall always be your good fairy." And—the flattering spell did its work thoroughly!

Before Princess Vera had reached Bratskoe, Madame Cherikoff had sent over her own maids to assist the servants sent from Ulitza, in removing all the multitudinous luxuries which Russian aristocrats drag around the continental states with them on their ostentatious tours.

It was with a glad sigh of relief that she saw the laden

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baggage wagons at last disappear, on the roads leading to Wosnescenk!

Down the river to Odessa,—thence, to Kustendje, and up the Danube,—was an easy voyage for the Serbian attendants! The good lady was overjoyed to see these evidences of a long foreign sojourn of the stormy-hearted Baroness!

"It is better for them both"—she thankfully ejaculated, "and Ivan will soon become a leading noble!"

For—all the steppe would know now that Captain Ivan Radovich was the responsible master of the two splendid estates whose owners had crystallized into shining ornaments of the brilliant court on the Neva! The village of Bratskoe was in a general rejoicing, for the handsome, liberal young Guardsman was a local hero, and generally beloved.

The coming of the vivacious Princess Vera was a joyous herald, too, of a happy summer in a lovely land,—where, with rudely expressed hospitality,—the wheels were often taken off the wayfarers' carriages until the isolated hosts were willing to allow the welcomed guest to depart finally in peace, after long-drawn-out courtesies!

Around the merry Princess always centered the jollity of the whole country side, and, Olga Cherikoff well knew the magnet which would soon bring the young officers from Wosnescenk,—and—the ardent youthful nobles, all in from the outlying domains!

Peace and a coming happiness had smoothed every wrinkle from the widow's fair face,—but, her tranquil evening prayers before the bejeweled icon would have been changed to anxious supplications, had she known that Arcady Radovich, now burly with prosperity,—and the fatness of Baroness Lili's table,—hidden in a huge beard, and swathed in the Serbian national costume,—was now comfortably installed with the Intendant of his brother's village on the Dying Water!

The stern orders of Captain Radovich,—the new Master,—had made the frightened Intendant Arcady's very slave!

"Look you,—my good man!" said Ivan. "My uncle

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is here on a secret mission, he has my authority to give orders in my name! I will easily hoodwink this young officer with his guard.

"After I go back to Kief, I will have them all sent away,—and—Baron Arcady is to suit himself in his own habits!

"And—now—you guard him with your life! Your only business is to please him,—and—then you will be retained here for life,—when I am the master."

The Intendant needed no second word, for, loyal and dumb, he was attached to Baron Arcady, as a native-born son of the steppe.

Moreover—the coarse familiarity of the noble who had let himself down,—was pleasing to the underlings who preyed upon the simple villagers left helpless under them! He was one after their own heart!

Here was always a sure friend,—and apologist,—in the disguised noble,—and—the "unjust steward" proceeded to fawn upon the man who now represented the young Master!

The ostentatious luxury of Baroness Lili's winter in Nice,—the lavishness of the coming hospitalities,—the disregard for expense in the embassy of Serbian attendants, all confirmed the magnified rumors of the sudden rise in the family fortunes!

It was not long before Captain Ivan's importations of foreign luxuries proved that wine,—wassail—and women, would surely rule on the Dying Water, in the brilliant summer.

Before Princess Vera had arrived at Bratskoe, with an escort of several young cavaliers, and a visiting bevy of ladies,—the military guard was withdrawn from Baron Alexandre's home!

What need of a plebeian Lieutenant and a few beggarly Cossacks,—when the magnificent young Guardsman,—now Aide de Camp to the Corps Commander at Kief—clattered around with his own dragoon guard and fierce Cossack orderlies.

It was high tide in the fortunes of the Radovichs—for, with a wise liberality,—the General and the Baron had loosened the purse strings to placate the trouble-

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some woman who had blazed out as a social star of the first magnitude at Nice.

And, now, all was ready for the delicious tête-à-têtes by the Dying Water,—in which Ivan Radovich, with an impetuous eagerness, waited to receive at the fair hands of Princess Vera,—the coveted commission of Major.

The young noble was even now dimly aware of some mysterious bond between Arcady and the woman who ruled his opening life,—the beautiful witch who showered sudden preferment upon him!

On his way back to Kief, for a fortnightly attendance at the military leveès of his chief,—he led Princess Vera out into the garden of the Bratskoe villa, in the hush of a balmy spring night!

The Easter had glided by and hundreds of teams were busy once more in the emerald steppe,—turning up the rich, fat soil, for the coming harvests! Where they stood they could see the slender marble shaft, marking the untenanted grave of his beautiful sister, lost, in the very flower of her young womanhood!

Ivan was eager and appealing in his passionate affection! "When I come back—you must be wholly mine," he whispered.

Then, with gleaming eyes, the crafty woman broke off a little bud from the nearest rose tree.

"In two happy weeks,—there will be blossoms,—roses here,—and—the roses will be blooming in your own gardens, on the Dying Water! Come back,—my king, my lover! Come to me, there, by the Mertvovod. You will find me—waiting with a glowing heart,—and,—open arms,—and,—we will gather the roses together! It is the time of roses—but—wait, till they bloom for you!"

When, the next morning, the watchful Circe had driven a dozen miles on the way with the love-blinded Ivan,—as he rode happily off, at the head of his escort,—she turned back when her young hero could no longer see her fluttering handkerchief!

"Drive to Baron Alexandre's! Quickly! Do not go back through the village! Hasten, for,—I have much to do there!"

Before the evening shadows fell,—Arcady Radovich

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had gone over every point of their double plot with the woman whose hatred now sparkled in her eyes, as she raised her menacing hand toward the steppe palace of Khaminavatka, blazing out to the north resplendent in the golden rays of the setting sun,—far beyond the purling stream!

"He must die,—the brute!" she cried, "but, not, till his shame is established,—till the name of Dumont is disgraced,—till he is known as a cowardly abductor of a peevish girl whom he has dragged down to share his harem with that serf witch who has dragged him even deeper down."

And—then her hungry eyes sought Arcady's, with a malignant gleam.

"When?" she whispered. "I dare not tell Ivan till he is my very own! Till he is drunken with love—and the philter of the dawning summer makes each vein run madly in passion! But,—what have I to tell him? He comes in two weeks! It is the last chance to avenge Milovitch,—Lili,—yourself,—and,——" the proud woman paused, for she would not own how deeply her soul had been stirred by Serge Dumont's careless avoidance of her offered charms.

Arcady growled, "So far, I have made no real progress! I dare not cross the Dying Water alone! I can not work without one brave helper! Ivan is a devil when aroused—and—you must awake his wrath and give him to me! I will carry on his frenzy, but,—you must speak the first words."

"A man,—and—a coward!" Vera sneered. "I am but a woman,—and,—I swear I will find out the secret of yonder seraglio! I go now for a flying visit of a week to Ratzo and Youresief! My young lord does me the honor to be jealous," she demurely smiled. And, so she made haste to finish her delicate maneuvers in his absence.

Arcady Radovich crushed the angered woman's arm with his left hand till she winced with pain! "See there!" he cried, showing the ugly red scar crossing the back of his right hand. "My hand was nearly cut off by one of

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that cur's disguised messengers, when he was plotting to steal away this rebellious girl!

"I have sworn to turn my knife around in his heart, in payment!

"Find the clue, my lady—only find the clue! And, then,—leave me to do the work! For, I will turn Ivan into a fiend,—after you—have turned him into a fool!"

And, so, the two crafty schemers were well in accord—before they separated! Vera cried—"Use every craft,—use money,—I will furnish it! I will give a place for life on my new estate to any one who will betray them!"

"Damn him!" growled Arcady. "He only treats his menials too well. Has he not taken his queen from among them?

"When Anton kept the station, I could reach all his messengers easily! A few roubles,—a half dozen bottles of vodki,—and—the thing was done! But, now—the station is at the meadow farms! Boursakoff—a good enough bull of a fellow, has married the farmer's pretty girl Marika!

"I dare not go there now. It would mean my instant arrest!

"But—you,—a woman,—a sleek serpent,—why can you not linger there? They would bow down to the Princess Vera!"

The capricious beauty smiled approvingly on Arcady. "You have given me an idea! I will linger going and coming,—and—there may be a way to work a spy in there! Never mind! Our day will come,—and—you—and I—and Ivan, with Lili, will give a festival when Serge lies rotting in yonder chapel!"

"What a satin-skinned devil you are!" mused the acute Arcady,—as Vera drove away, intent upon an audacious scheme suggested by his Machevellian wisdom! "You were chasing down the dead Pierre—and, then—faute de mieux,—this fool, over there, whose serf-born mistress has taken the place that—you so long dreamed of,—the Lady of Khaminavatka!"

He ground his teeth in rage. "If Magda is in that house"—he swore, "we must find them together! His blood shall flow at her feet,—her presence there alive is

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a complete exoneration!—but,—only Ivan and I, must strike the blow! No outsiders. It must be a family vengeance!"

With an infinite cunning, over his vodki that night, he reconstructed the interior plan of the chateau from his vigilantly taken mental notes on the long examination made on the day of the police descent!

"They are off their guard now,—surely,—where does he hide her? There has never been a rumor."

Suddenly, he climbed the stairs and then began to gaze with his night glass over at the splendid palace of the steppes.

The two lower stories and the great buttressed basement were wrapped in darkness! But,—all the windows of the third story blazed out with light! "I have it," cried the excited wretch!

"The towers,—the corner towers,—now, I know the way! I will be ready for Ivan! We can take a body of our people and hide them in the sedges on the river bank! I can give a signal for their help—but—not—till we have struck home!

"Oh! My God! For just one clue! I must trust to the Devil,—and,—to Vera Orbeleff!"

By day, while waiting for the retinue of the visiting Princess,—Arcady Radovich was busied in his rooms with a secret labor, over which he grinned as he toiled with the devotion of a peasant workman.

When not engaged in his secret task,—lying straightened out on the roof of the old mansion,—he was now studying every corner and weakness of his enemy's stronghold. "I know how to get in there now,—to leave no sign of our coming,—and,—if we only find that she-devil alone with them,—to leave no trace of our departure! We must only use the knife!

"It shall be done, in silence,—in the night,—and—the long score of years shall be paid in full! Ivan is a headlong devil—and—nothing will stop him—when he knows that his sister is there. He must only know, when all is ready!"

And—so, he waited for the woman who had gone away to beguile General Ratzo and Prince Youresief—

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and to wheedle out of them—the gossip which had been long denied her!

It never dawned upon the disgraced nobleman that Madame Vera's game was to undermine the whole house of Radovich,—that she destined the heedless youth to be the convenient mask of her own strange wayward game of Life.

The visiting Princess had already laid her skillful snares!

Armed with all the secret knowledge of the whole intrigue,—pregnant with its coming tragedy,—Vera Orbeleff had determined to extort from General Ratzo and the discouraged Prince Youresief, the very last detail of the aftermath of the seizure of Khaminavatka! She knew well that but one distant possibility made the three brothers Radovich tremble!

"If Serge Dumont should produce the missing man who had so artfully effected Pierre Dumont's death! If —Moschka and Anton Antonovitch had confessed all to the veteran Marechale de Noblesse! Then,—their last defenses would go down like straw in the flames!"

But,—the voluptuous siren smiled in her pride of strength! Well she knew the fear of the Police General Ratzo of her secret influence over the uxorious Minister of War,—too well, she knew that Prince Youresief dreaded a sudden removal as Marechale de Noblesse in case of any resumption of the vendetta in the Kherson,—and, she knew, too, how to inflame the fears of these distant officials with a lightly delivered revelation of her superior and private knowledge! But—one name was to be tabooed—the name of Magda Radovich,—the missing Day Star!

In her mind, Arcady's suggestions had ripened, and, when she halted at the meadow farms, for the refreshment of her horses for the long drive toward Bobrinetz, —the gracious Princess charmed all by her winning affability.

A few presents,—a little feminine diplomacy, and she easily obtained the right to leave one of her coachmen taken suddenly ill, for a week with the clustering peas-

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ants until she should return from her flying trip to Bobrinetz!

And, then—with his pockets well stuffed with roubles,—Vera Orbeleff's Petersburg coachman was left to earn an independence for life—by corrupting some wayfarer from Khaminavatka! "Promise anything"—she said—"I will make it good,—if you only succeed!"

So,—with a peach-bloom cheek and a smiling face,—the happy-looking young Court beauty departed to fool the two provincial officials to the top of their bent!

All unarmed before her glowing feminine charms,—these wise men both listened to her cooing voice, and, gazing into her kindling eyes,—babbled on as men will—and told bit by bit—different stories,—which when matched by the triumphant beauty set her heart aflame with the certainty of a coming vengeance.

"He must never leave the Dying Water alive," murmured Vera Orbeleff, on the night before her departure, for the indiscretion of General Ratzo was well paid by a few casual intercharges of future caresses à la mode de Russie.

"I'm glad that fool Dumont is soon going abroad!" muttered the Police General, "for young Radovich is hot-blooded enough! It's well to have them separated! Dumont sent me his passports to be vised to go abroad for six months or a year!

"I wonder if he will take the village beauty abroad as Madame la Baronne Dumont! She dresses up to the part now,—and—to do her justice,—acts it! They tell me that he is her lover,—schoolmaster,—slave,—and—music teacher!" laughed Ratzo.

And,—all that night,—Vera Orbeleff fretted that she could not send a courier to warn Arcady! She dared not,—for Ratzo's spies were all-powerful in the Kherson! "If he slips away—he must be followed and killed on the road! It is easy enough"—she mused, for the General had told her of the Baron Dumont's application to have his passports vised for Unghein,—on the Roumanian frontier.

"The shortest straight line out of Russia"—she cried,—her bosom heaving. "The road to wild Roumania,

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unfrequented by the gentry! I see it all. The woman will either be with him in disguise, precede him, or else follow him!

"Oh! for an hour now with Ivan and Arcady! We must have our spies at the frontier before him!"

And—much marveled her princely hostess to see the young patrician lose her beauty sleep and depart, at dawn, for distant Bratskoe!

She had twisted the two wary men of the world around her pretty finger,—and left the Prince Youresief wondering at woman's easy forgetfulness! "Last year,—her heart was racked with Love's soft pains for Serge—this fool,—and,—here—she never even mentioned his name!"

The good-natured old noble plumed himself upon her soft yielding to his feebly volunteered coquetries—for,—old as he was,—a pretty woman was still the queen of the hour,—and,—of his too facile heart! A fool,—a vain fool,—in his own conceit—even as all aged lovers,—and potentates,—the rich and high in station,—who would writhe to know a bright-eyed boy lording it boldly over the charms which they approach with such trembling reverence!

"Ah! Si la jeunesse savait,—si la vielleisse pouvait!"

It was eight o'clock of a starlight night when Madame la Princesse Vera Orbeleff's horses clattered into the meadow farms! She passed the deserted station on the hill and the lonely cross where Pierre Dumont's body had been found, with the glance of a restless tiger!

Before she had set foot to the ground, her coachman was at her side,—the now rejuvenated invalid who had become the coq du village,—in this happy week of invalidism.

"You must pass the night—here"—he whispered.

"Are you mad?" the Princess answered. "I must reach Bratskoe—on the gallop,—if it kills the horses, and —then go on to Baron Alexandre's to-night! It is a life and death matter!"

"Listen! Barina," the man murmured, detaining her gloved hand, raised to push him away. "I know all—I have the Barin Dumont's discharged coachman drunk, down here, in my hut! *We hold the secret that you need!*"

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"Tell me—tell me," his mistress hissed. "Be quick!"

"That depends, on how much you are willing to pay for it! We are agreed,—Dimitri and I,—and—we want our cash in good blue roubles! For, we will never work again!"

The raging woman was forced to temporize. "The Barin Dumont is going away!" she murmured. "Not for a week!" coolly said her impudent servant. "Dimitri was going to drive them to the frontier! He was discharged to-day for drunkenness, and—for a slip of the tongue! Be quick now and decide! You must stay here! He will not go to Bratskoe—or to Baron Alexandre's!"

"What excuse have I?" softly whispered the Princess Vera,—blushing even in the dark to be at the beck and call of her blackmailing coachman.

"I'll fix that easily!" the sly rogue said, as he twisted a rope from a few strands of horse hair plucked from the tail of one of the panting steeds!

In an instant, two of the four splendid trotters were artfully lamed by tight-drawn strands of twisted horsehair cutting into the flesh of their fetlocks!

When the household approached to offer their homage to Madame la Princesse,—already the two coachmen were leading away two painfully hobbling horses!

With obsequious alacrity, the distinguished traveler was conducted to the best room of the prosperous farm steading, for the fifty acres of ever-green sunken meadows were a fortune, in the exposed steppes, an oasis of delightful fertility.

Not long after the Princess' hasty supper,—she departed to examine the condition of her petted carriage horses, under the voluble ministrations of her own retinue.

One of her men, mounted on a borrowed Cossack pony, had already disappeared in the direction of Bratskoe, riding as he who brings tidings of life and death moment!

It was after midnight when Arcady Radovich leaped out of his bed, in the Intendant's house on the Dying Water.

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With grumbling curses, he struck a light—and—then stared as one who sees a ghost, when he read the few words which sealed the fate of the two whose ruin and exposure he so ardently begged at the hands of the gods!

"Found! They are there,—ready to depart now for the frontier! Send a courier for Ivan! Tell him I bid him to come! Say that the Roses are in bloom,—and, waiting! Give him no sign of your mission, but bid him ride, without delay. Tell him I will await him—with you."

And, before the excited man had fairly realized the delicious sense of his new power,—power to crush,—to destroy—his hated enemy—the flying Ukraine steed,—fleetest of the stable,—was bearing their lightest rider on to Kief,—with the summons for the new Barin—Captain Ivan of the Guards!

Pale and ghastly was the Princess Vera as she returned to the farm house from her examination of her horses at dawn! She had lingered an hour with her coachman confidant, and answered the proffers of help calmly.

"My two horses are much better! I can now proceed slowly,—and—I have sent a man, picked up here, on to Bratskoe with a message to send fresh horses out to me on the road!" Her largesse was liberally distributed, and willingly, too, for she had achieved the crowning triumph of her campaign of revenge!

The discharged coachman of Khaminavatka,—his waving beard shaven,—and—clad in a Cossack's cast-off rags—rode past Nicolas Boursakoff, on his way to Novokrainka, without Baron Dumont's Intendant knowing that the squalid pony rider carried the life and death of his proud master in his dirty, traitorous hands,—now crossed with a Judas price of silver roubles!

Pale-faced,—but with burning eyes,—Vera Orbeleff smiled an adieu to her humble court, as her carriage moved slowly away!

The instant relief of cutting the tightened strands soon brought her horses into their wonted form, as they crowned the hill!

But, it was only when a mile away, out of sight, that

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she thrilled her blackmailing servant with the order, "Drive like the wind! We must arrive there with him! He must not get away!"

"He dare not! Barina!" grinned the driver. "Dimitri has taken his life in his hand!" It was the very sweetest moment in Vera Orbeleff's life,—to ride past Nicolas Boursakoff, speeding over the steppe,—and know that he was journeying to Bobrinetz to bring back his doomed master's passports!

"A long voyage,—a long voyage,—Serge"—she murmured,—as she smiled her acknowledgment of the Intendant's humble salutation,—"a voyage to that dark land, whence no one returns!

"And,—your lady love—goes to a gloomy cell in a nunnery,—for life,—to dream there of the vanished joys among the roses of Khaminavatka!—and I,—Ivan comes to me,—love in his heart,—to earn his rank—to meet me among the roses—and—to learn that he must give a life, —for a life!"

In a delicious trance,—she drove three hours later past Khaminavatka, where the green leaves had come back to the trees and Nature was throbbing with the wild, hidden rapture of Earth's perennial spring!

The faint blue column of smoke hung over the lonely palace of the steppe where the happy married lovers were preparing for their hegira of love,—the brief voyage to that frontier which was to both of them a salvation!

"Wait!" she whispered. "Après moi,—le deluge!" Her unforgiving woman's heart was filled with all the sense of a delicious coming triumph,—but yet poisoned with the rage of a woman scorned!

And,—bitter tears wet her trembling lashes before she met the breathless Arcady, in the gloomy drawing room of the Radovich mansion at eve.

"I have him safe—locked up,—as you wrote! He will not speak a word,—till you come!" hoarsely cried Arcady. "I will unlock his lips"—smiled Vera. "Roubles will work wonders—the victory is ours!

"Now,—to our work,—for,—when Ivan comes the final blow must be struck! Boursakoff has gone for the passports! It will take him four days! Ivan will be

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here in two—and,—the Intendant must find his master dead—and the police in possession—when he returns! The empty-headed girl must be safe in Bratskoe, under the charge of the magistrate,—and Madame Cherikoff.

"She will not get away from me!" grimly said Vera,—her white teeth closing with a wolf-like snap.

In the time-darkened old dining hall of the gloomy mansion,—in a half an hour,—Baron Arcady Radovich sat with the Princess Vera at his side interrogating the sly coachman who was the treasurer and spokesman of the Blackmailing and Judas association, so recently formed.

"How shall we insure their fidelity?" muttered Princess Vera to her fellow conspirator! The old house was deserted, and only the death watch ticked in the worm-eaten wainscoting!

A single candelabra illumined one end of the vast hall, whose doors had been carefully locked by the crafty Arcady!

Before him lay his sword and two heavy revolvers, for now, under the ban, he trusted no man!

"I will take care of that," replied Arcady. "Did you bring money enough from Bratskoe?"

"I could only get two thousand roubles, but—I will make it five in a week," the Princess whispered. "Think of the risk,—your life,—Ivan's! Oh! My God—if these fellows should lie!"

And then—Arcady laughed grimly. "I will lock this fellow up with our Intendant, money and all,—when we make our attempt!

"If he has deceived us,—he will have his throat cut! I'll not let the Intendant cross the river! As for the other—the Khaminavatka fellow—my men will take him, bound—down into the rushes with them, in hiding!

"If the girl is not in that old rat hole of a palace, they will just knock him in the head,—and—pitch him into the river!

"So,—they gage their lives—for ours! They won't know this,—till after we have bought them! And—fear—will then keep them close to us,—for protection from that she-devil old Barbe Federoff!"

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"Good!" said Vera—her eyes sparkling. "Now—question him! First, the bargain,—I have the money in two packets in my bosom!"

With a keen, searching glance,—Arcady addressed the low-browed moujik who had been intently studying the faces of the two patricians. "How much do you fellows want?" he roughly said. "Be quick about it!"

"A thousand roubles, money down—and—you and the Princess to take care of us both! We want to go away to her new place by Bobrinetz. Here,—the other fellows would soon kill us!"

He jerked a dirty thumb in the direction of the castle, where the innocent enemy slumbered in each other's arms!

"How do we know that you do not lie?" fiercely cried Arcady. "You have our heads to answer for it!" boldly said the coachman, with confidence. "Then,—be quick about it! Tell us all!"—said Arcady, as he tossed him a package of bank notes! "Can you count that money?"

"I only count up to ten," said the simple brute,—his eyes gleaming at the sight of the bills which Princess Vera had thrown on the table.

He stubbornly refused to say a word until the Princess had piled up and arranged the money for him which he only knew by the pictures and figures upon the greasy paper roubles which had crossed a thousand villainous palms.

At last, he began! "Dimitri will tell you the rest! He knows her hiding place,—and—that he would not tell me—until I gave him the money!

"He has been the coachman for years to drive the Barin's finest team and sleigh! It never came to him that there was anything wrong, for a long time!

"He has been driving out Xenia,—that woman who is the young Barin's lady love,—often both in the day and the night,—and, always—with the Barin!

"And—he finally noticed both in the carriage and the sleigh, that the young Barin never caressed Xenia, nor talked much with her!

"But, often at night, both in the summer and the winter,—the Barin would be very loving and,—then—at

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last, though the woman with him wore Xenia's dresses, shawls and veils,—Dimitri saw that she was a much smaller woman!

"And,—not showing his watching,—he would slyly listen to her voice! *It was not the voice of Xenia!* And,—so,—you know what our peasants are! Not so very foolish! Dimitri always noticed that when Xenia drove, she would often boldly uncover her face,—and—so,—the Barin drove with her all around the villages—and—even into Bratskoe,—as well as over to the meadow farms!

"But, when the smaller woman was with him, it was always on the lonely roads,—and often only over the steppe itself—or buried in the plantation shades!

"Besides, even Boursakoff did not dare to approach or stop the Barin's carriage or sleigh,—not at any time! And—why not,—if the woman was Xenia—the same mud of the steppe as the rest of us?

"At last,—one day, two months ago,—after Father Adrian was driven out home,—when he came for Easter,—the sudden fierce steppe wind tore away the veil of the woman by the Barin's side!

"Dimitri did not dare to speak—for, he had stolen one glance—just one—when the young Barin leaped out to recover the veil, blown fifty archines away,—and lodged there on a thorn bush!

"He held his head to the front,—while the Barin talked with the young Barina Magda, in a strange language."

"French, of course," muttered Arcady, to the excited Vera. "It was all too late," continued the coachman.

"They drove home at once—and,—for two or three days—the Barin eyed Dimitri closely, and, took another driver for his midnight frolics.

"And, Dimitri, angry and ashamed, then watched and spied! He told no one! He found out what he will only tell to you!

"And,—then,—as he is a moujik,—he began to drink on the sly, and,—the Barin sent him over to Novokrainka, with the fine troika of the best Orloffs when

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General Androffsky passed by two weeks ago! Dimitri got drunk at the old Post Station!

"The horses ran away,—the best one broke his leg,—and had to be shot—and then,—the General waited perforce three hours at Novokrainka!

"There was a great row—and—Boursakoff at once, discharged Dimitri, keeping back his wages for the year to pay for the horse,—a part only—for, the horse was worth a thousand roubles!

"And—Barin Serge would listen to nothing! His dead brother had loved the horse,—and so,—poor Dimitri was soon chased off the domain, penniless! So,—you see why he wants his revenge on Boursakoff,—who has turned him away from the village where he was born! And—on the fool of a Barin, too."

"Did Barina Magda know that the coachman saw her face clearly uncovered?" huskily cried Arcady—his fingers straying toward his revolver! "Yes!" simply answered the man! "It is a gentle dove,—she was afraid,—afraid that the Barin would beat the coachman! And,—so—she said nothing,—nothing,—only,—all the way home that time, she lay in the Barin's arms, and sobbed in silence! She was so frightened!"

"And, the Barin spoke not a word,—not even one word to Dimitri?" broke in the Princess impatiently. "How could he?" cried the man. "He saw nothing. He was fifty yards away! You know, we drivers never look back at our masters! We are too well trained for that!"

Arcady leered viciously. "I know! Go on!" "And, then,—Dimitri was driven to drinking crazy with the jeers of the peasants who saw him come down to be a ragged vagrant—from being a fine coachman, with his silk hat and blue gown,—and splendid robes to warm him! He did not leave Khaminavatka till he made sure where the bird is hidden! The rest he will only tell to you!"

"Come on!" cried Arcady,—seizing a revolver. "Come with me, and tell him that you have your money! Here you see his,—lying ready on the table! We will protect you—and,—give you both a handsome present—if he tells the whole truth! If not"—Arcady suddenly

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cocked his revolver and leveled it at the blackmailer, who fell on his knees in abject terror.

"Get up, you fool! Come on!" said Arcady,—as he left the Princess pacing the long room like a caged tigress. While Arcady was gone, she took up the branched silver sconce and glided into the deserted drawing room.

Before a picture of Magda Radovich,—the lost Day Star,—she halted, and gazed at the young girl's sweet face in silence!

Through the windows she caught a gleam of brilliant light in the third story of the chateau across the sleeping meadows!

"Is it worth while!" she murmured, as a shudder shook her lissome body.

And—then— a relentless devil in her heart, suddenly loosened by the thought of raptures stolen from her coveted treasures of life—answered:

"Yes! Let him die!"

With a firm step she returned to face Dimitri, the shivering Judas of the Mertvovod! "There is your money! Take it!" coldly said Arcady—"and,—now,—be brief! Tell us where she is hidden! Do you know?"

"I have seen them together! I know"—cried the greedy wretch—"but,—I will only tell you! You are of our own Kherson people!

"The Princess is a woman! A Court lady. They will all talk!" he mumbled. "And,—I take my life in my hand!"

"So, he is coward as well as traitor!" sneered Vera,—as she walked away to the end of the room to examine a portrait of Lili Radovich,—in all her unveiled audacious beauty,—one over which Milovitch had gloated while the hoodwinked husband sat at his side—and the glowing original's passion-laden eyes met his across the table.

"Take your money,—and,—speak out—or I will blow your brains out! Worse,—I will send you over to Barin Serge and he will turn his Ukraine dogs loose upon you! You know what that means!"

In whispered tones,—the abject scoundrel gave to the infuriated Arcady, the vile secret of how he had gained

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a place from where he had seen the lovers clasped in each other's arms! "And,—you will swear that the woman is the Barina Magda?" solemnly demanded Arcady. "I will risk my life on it! Go there,—catch them, quickly! Beware lest he steals away to Unghein!

"Already Boursakoff has sent the horses forward on the road! For, they were to drive to the frontier without stopping,—three hundred versts! You know why!"

"Swear to me on the cross, that you have told the truth!" cried Arcady, suddenly flashing a jeweled cross before the astounded Dimitri's eyes!

With trembling lips, he kissed the cross,—sinking to his knees and crossing himself abjectly.

"I swear before God and Saint Vladimir and Saint Dimitri,—my patron saint,—that I have told the truth!"

"Very good!" coolly said Arcady! "I am going to risk my life on it,—and,—yours too! You shall go with me— and, help me up there!"

"Spare me,—spare me," howled Dimitri. "Barin Serge is a young lion!"

"He will be a dead lion"—growled Arcady—"and, you, —a dead dog,—if I don't find that girl up there! I have the chateau watched even now! If any carriage leaves there, it will be followed and attacked—but—Barin Ivan comes to-morrow night!

"It is the dark of the moon! You will only have to go over and show me the place!

"I will take twenty good men into the garden—and hide them in the rushes near the stream. The Dying Water is only two feet deep now!

"And—Barin Ivan will bring all his own soldiers! You shall both have a good extra present! Now—you'll have the other fellow to keep you company till I call for you, at midnight, to-morrow!

"The Intendant will give you all you want! And,— both of you fellows shall go later to the Princess' place, —to be well taken care of for life! You shall want for nothing!"

With an impatient gesture, the Princess advanced— crying, "You shall be rich for life,—if you protect the Barin Ivan and my friend here!" The magic word "sol-

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diers" had put confidence into the brute's heart! "I'll go!" he murmured,—as he buckled the price of his shame under his leather belt! For, "soldiers" meant—the heavy hand of the White Czar!

Long after the two scoundrels had slept,—their consciences dulled by a bottle of vodki, the exquisite Princess Vera and her murderous confidante lingered over a bottle of champagne,—talking in whispers of, a deed without a name.

"There is but one thing I absolutely demand of you, Arcady," said the Princess, as she stood above on the stairway, while the dissolute Baron prepared to go and watch his two caged scoundrels! "Leave Ivan to me,—to me,—alone,—if you wish him to avenge your family honor! He will be here by sunset to-morrow!

"Keep away from us,—till I call you in,—and,—then,—I give him over to you,—and to vengeance! But,—first,—he is mine—to mould him to my will! He must know that he strikes for my sake—as well as, yours!"

"I understand"—significantly growled Arcady. "You will drive him love crazy,—first!"

With a meaning smile, the beautiful Sphinx ascended the stairway to dream of a happy future with her darling dupe and lover Ivan! "He shall pay the price!" she muttered, as she studied her unfaded beauties in the glass.

"Why not? We all do,—in this world! As for the other,—bah! A priest's fable!" and, she lay down to pleasant dreams in the room where Lili Radovich had often plotted her soft self-surrender to the man now lying dead in far-away Circassia. And,—the old proverb "birds of a feather" was strangely verified.

There was the hush of a holy peace in another chamber across the Dying Water, where a dim light burned in a red crystal globe!

There, beside his wife,—harassed now by his anxious forebodings,—Serge Dumont watched over the darling of his heart!

Magda's rich brown hair flowed over her marble bosom and she lay with one slender hand beneath her cheek,—her rounded arm resting lightly on her gently heaving bosom!

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Serge knelt beside her and kissed the fellow of the hand beneath her velvet cheek, for, on its slender fingers now shone his mother's wedding ring!

In the dim watches of the night a thousand new fears beset him.

He had counseled long with Father Adrian on the visit which had made their lovely Christmas and New Year's a hidden festival of joy.

The general rejoicings of the peasants had allowed him to shower benefits with a liberal hand upon all,—though the great chateau was still rigidly closed to his people,—save an occasional passing guest of note,—who brought the military and court gossip to the lonely prisoner of Love!

Serge Dumont's whole life had mingled with that of the brave and spirited girl who had dared disgrace,—exile, and perhaps,—a nun's cloister prison—for his sake!

And,—while Xenia kept her faithful watch,—the three innocently plotted to arrange the departure for Hungary—by the short line through Roumania.

It was Father Adrian who had suggested the safe disguise of a nun!

"I can send her, by a trusted follower,—one of our nuns,—furnished with a complete extra outfit for you! In her company,—escorted by your husband,—you can travel in a closed carriage, and, so, be passed over the frontier, with superstitious respect!

"The passport of one of our dead sisters,—for—alas! they, too, die,—will suffice! I will see that it is properly vised, and, the sister will bring it with her. In crossing at Unghein, you have the shortest road!

"The only fear, Serge"—mournfully said Father Adrian, "is the betrayal by some crafty wretch! Believe me,—you may know the camp,—the court,—the foreign world,—but, the sly craft of our Kherson and Ukraine peasantry is beyond belief!"

"I shall have a good escort! I will be armed to the teeth!" hotly cried the young husband.

"Alas! what I fear is a secret betrayal to the wild Radovichs!

"Then, a hue and cry,—a pursuit, and,—once,—that

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the veil is lifted,—there is the dreadful anger of the Czar!

"In any case—all your devotion,—your life blood, even, would not save your darling!"

And—yet,—after a long discussion, there seemed to be no other plan! It was a forlorn hope! Love's only thoroughfare.

On this lonely night,—while Serge Dumont watched his sleeping wife, he felt gloomy forebodings of an unknown disaster!

Cut off from his stern and unforgiving sister—forced into a false position by the need of Xenia's aid and ministrations to the White Lady of Khaminavatka,—estranged from Wassili, his proud nephew, and, chafing under the silence of Prince Youresief,—the avoidance of the nobles, and the cold distance of General Ratzo,—he knew that in God's mercy alone was his trust!

His only aid was his faithful Xenia,—and the noble Father Adrian, whose hands were tied by his vows!

Even he,—had risked name,—honor, and liberty, in celebrating the informal marriage!

With a restless heart, Serge awaited the return of Boursakoff with his own passport, a vital necessity!

He had already paid the tax for a foreign residence of a year—and,—the last needed formality was General Ratzo's granting the passport.

Even now, the relays of horses were on the road,—the friendly nun was on her way from Kharkov,—for, a warning courier had arrived!

The bell beat midnight as he walked to the window, and tried to read the secret of the stars! His heart throbbed in an exquisite bliss as he gazed upon her there,—the idol of his soul—the sweet Lady of Khaminavatka.

With a strength that was as the strength of ten,—he swore "Love shall prevail! It is for my darling's sake!"

He stooped and kissed her a loving "good-night."

"May God bless my own darling!"

He stole away to examine every bolt and bar,—every lock and barrier,—for, he murmured, "Only two nights more,—if Boursakoff brings my passport!" For, on the Easter visit, Father Adrian had completed every last arrangement to cover the flight of the lovers.

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Then,—would come safety,—Youresief's tardy help,—pardon,—and peace and happiness!

But, there was one riding on from Kief through this starry night who rode as the avenger of blood rides!

Sweeping on in advance of his wearied Cossacks, Captain Ivan Radovich looked back at the church domes of Gordova and smiled! "To-morrow night, I shall meet her! It is the time of Roses." He thought of her burning words!

The fierce joys of possession,—of his unrestrained ownership of the panting beauty, captive in his arms—goaded him on!

And, so— never a word did he speak as he rode into Bratskoe, in the glare of the afternoon sun! Madame Cherikoff paled as Ivan's charger staggered and fell to its knees when the lithe rider leaped from the dying steed!

"A horse,—quick,"—he cried. "I must go on, to the Dying Water!"

A draught of wine refreshed him, and then,—away he sped,—never drawing rein,—till in the glow of the dying day, he rode into the courtyard of the lonely mansion!

At the door, veiled from sight, Arcady met him.

The sight of his uncle's face brought a shudder to the young lover's heart. "Vera"—he gasped—"where?"

But—Arcady only pointed, and,—going out,—softly closed the door.

Ivan turned and saw her standing on the stair above him,—the woman whose image had haunted his heart for the long-drawn-out weeks,—the woman whose lightest word was his law,—the idol of his enraptured soul!

With softly shining eyes, she stood there above him,—her arms opened,—and—her trembling lips only murmured, "Come!"

With a glad cry, he sprang up the stair to meet the woman whose lightest mood swayed him as the wind moves the quivering forest leaves!

And, then, the fair Circe, conscious of her powers, led the young lover to a window. "See, my Ivan," she whispered. "The buds have blossomed,—the blossoms have ripened into full-hearted flowers!

"Take me out,—among the roses,—till you hear the

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story of my heart,—the fond story of a woman's love,—the story of a woman's devotion to you,—and yours!"

They stood clasped,—heart to heart,—there in a trance of burning passion!

When he drew his lips away,—leaving her trembling and with her pallid cheeks aflame with the burning fever of her exaltation,—she whispered, "I shall know to-night,—I shall know if you are a man,—if you are wholly mine—and you, shall hear all my story,—under the rose!"

He followed her down the silent hall,—and,—out into the deserted garden, where Magda Dumont had kept her love watch as Magda Radovich.

They talked of that future,—in which their lives were to mingle as in one golden glow,—lit up with the undying fire of Love!

It was two long hours that Arcady Radovich waited impatiently for their reluctant feet! He saw them slowly reënter the house, and, then, knew by the gleaming light that Princess Vera had led her lover into the vast drawing room!

There—before the sacred icon where Magda had prayed as a child,—Vera Orbeleff, with burning eyes, turned to her fiery lover! "Swear to me, on this icon, on my baptismal cross, that you will marry me before you see General Radovich, or the Baron again! Your whole future,—the honor of your family,—the General's rank,—your father's wealth,—and your mother's station, depend upon your answer!"

"I swear!" he cried, as he kissed the cross. "Here"—murmured Vera Orbeleff, "is your commission as Major! I have carried it on my heart. I only received it two days ago! I shall live to see you a Colonel,—a General. For, my last sigh is yours! And, now to prove to you that I would lay down my life for the honor of your family!"

She dragged him by the wrist, with convulsive force, to the window. "Do you know what I brought you here—for—Ivan, my Ivan—*my husband!* Do you see those lights gleaming in that scoundrel's castle—beyond the Dying Water? There—Serge Dumont keeps Magda,—

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our sister,—as his Sultana! I have long suspected it! It was I who hounded him down for your sake!"

"He must die"—yelled Ivan! "Arcady,—Arcady—I must go!" "Wait"—she cried, prisoning him in her lithe arms. "All is ready for your vengeance! Arcady is ready to strike, with you to lead—to-morrow night! They are in the toils!" "She shall die in convent walls!" cried Ivan!

"Go—go—Ivan—my husband!" the fierce woman murmured, caressing him with her honeyed kisses, "See—Arcady! We have the whole force ready,—the plans for secret entrance,—for surprise. See him—then,"—she cried, with burning eyes fixed on him, "come back to my arms!"

CHAPTER XV.

A MIDNIGHT SURPRISE.—BACK FROM THE DEAD! LOVE'S MIRACLE.

The darkness of midnight wrapped the palace on the steppes as a score of men silently met and exchanged their signals of greeting on the southern bank of the Dying Water! Here and there, a star faintly struggled through the murky night, and the spring breeze moved the rushes by the river murmuring the eternal song of Pan, the lament for the dead gods of Greece.

There was no sound save the rippling current, or the faint distant yelp of a Ukraine dog in the village, a half mile away!

To the left, the heavy masses of the hoary trees in the silent Park loomed up, with funereal blackness, clear cut against the softer murky blue of the skies of night! But two windows in the chateau of Khaminavatka showed a faint gleam of light, the massive pile standing out like a vast lonely rock in the midnight seas.

All the men grouped together wore Polish caps, and were clad in rude peasant costume save two, who now

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eagerly conferring, questioned a third in low whispers. Ivan Radovich alone disdained the weakness of disguise. His elegant figure was still clad in the uniform of the Preobajenskys, save that instead of a sword, he carried two heavy pistols and a long hunting knife, at his belt!

"Have you the ropes?" whispered Ivan to Arcady, who, still clad in his Serbian disguise, carried a belt revolver and a heavy knife. "Are you sure that they are long enough?" "Perfectly," huskily growled Arcady. "And, my ladder is a good ten feet longer than we need!"

"Let one man go in then, and wade across, and see how deep it is! Be sure there is no pot hole to flounder in! We want to hurry her back across here, if we find her!" said the excited captain.

Magda's brother was trembling like a leaf, he had not slept since he had thrown himself from his horse, the night before—and,—his potations only served to inflame the mad blood beating on his brain like a trip-hammer.

Keeping his hand firmly gripped on the wrist of the man by his side, the intending murderer turned and gazed back at the darkened mansion where but one window showed a gleam of light! There, Vera Orbeleff waited to hear of the death of her mortal foe!

"Shall we go on?" urged Arcady. "It is now after twelve!"

"Let us wait till one o'clock and see if that light is not extinguished! Have you all your dark lanterns ready?"

Four men standing near, a separate squad, raised the hand in salute! They alone wore the Cossack dress of the irregulars! And, these wild devils were now ready to follow their young Captain to the mouth of hell itself!

The body of his followers had thrown themselves down upon the grass, while Ivan and Arcady spoke in low tones.

"How will you get her down,—if all goes well?" anxiously demanded Arcady, who, both brave and cruel, thirsted now for the hour of triumph and vengeance!

He gripped his heavy Circassian blade tightly as he spoke. "Gag her!" gruffly answered Ivan, "roll her up

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in rugs, then lower her with the extra ropes, down the ladder to the men below!

"If the portfire is lit, our men will dash over and swarm up the ladder! If what you say is true, no one can get up in the three galleries while we control the principals—and—our man here on the horse will have the police in two hours. We could easily hold the upper story till then!

"The villagers, even if alarmed, would not dare to fire the chateau, and, we will have a strong force on the roof! They can not shoot at us! You tell me the battlements are five feet high!"

"Yes,—and we will put Xenia, that handsome devil, up for a target!" chuckled Arcady. "Boursakoff is not here! That's one good thing,—all the others are fools!"

Stealing behind a hummock and lighting a match,—Ivan looked at his watch.

"It is now after one!" he cried, for they had listened for three-quarters of an hour to the wailing night birds!

The agony of suspense was intolerable to the young soldier who had never been left a moment out of the sight of Vera or his attendant devil Arcady,—since the disclosure which had made him a ravening wolf!

"Come on!" he cried, tightening his belt, "You drop the men off every ten yards,—Arcady. I'll take this fellow and my Cossacks!

"Leave half the men in hiding at the bank here! All are to rush to the southwest corner tower and come up the ladder, if the portfire is lit. Otherwise they are to await orders, sent back by one of us!"

As the resolute young officer dragged the traitorous coachman to the edge of the stream, the frightened brute sank to his knees in terror.

"Up, or I drive this through your heart," said Ivan, pressing the sharp point of his heavy knife into the fellow's shrinking breast.

"You went up before,—you can do it again!"

And,—so,—silently the dark forms dropped one by one into the shallow stream, and led by Ivan, supported by the Cossacks,—the last were marshalled by Arcady, leaving a line of sentinels down to the bank. "Remem-

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ber, the knife only," he whispered. "No noise! Choke and gag any straggler, man, woman or child,— you all have cords!"

And then stealing up in Indian file, through the shrubbery of the ravine, a natural covered way,—Arcady joined Ivan at the foot of the southwest tower, from whose summit the red lights and white lights had flashed their message of love or fear across the Dying Water!

It was easy to clamber up to the open pavilion of the tower, left without windows at each story for the enjoyment of the matchless river valley view,—the air,— and the sight of the superb park with its lakes, chalet and the beautiful temple of the dead!

It was Arcady who affixed the rope ladder, quickly drawn up by one of the Cossacks, who, nimble as a squirrel, had easily scaled the clustered columns of the projecting wooden tower.

In an instant, seven men were huddled on the platform of the first story.

Ivan,—his teeth set in a pitiless rage,—sternly motioned upward,—for, the dreaming silence was unbroken! Below, he could just descry the silver stream, dividing the darkened meadows, and,—afar shone out the light from the window where Vera Orbeleff, with a wildly beating heart, awaited the signal of the red post fire at the southwest angle of the roof! It was a game for Life or Death now!

"Up!" whispered Ivan, as he grasped the swaying rope ladder,—the fruit of a fortnight's toil of the ingenious Arcady. Its braided strands of tough Russian rawhide would have safely held up a field piece, and the active marauders soon stood on the upper balcony, at the head of the tower!

The lightest Cossack soon clambered up over the battlement—and lashed the ladder firmly fast!

Then,—with a ferocious gesture,—Ivan grasped the coachman's trembling hand. "Now, remember, you die, if you betray us! Show us the way!"

In a last thrilling whisper, Ivan gave his orders to the Cossack who crouched on the corner of the roof in the darkness, ready with his post fire he had already lighted a slow match!

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And—in the profound silence—the six men crept over the roof, following the shivering Judas who had sold his master to shame—to ruin—to death—for a few greasy roubles!

Below them—in the rooms where Xenia had queened it for a year,—were two women now anxiously finishing their last preparations for the secret flight to Unghein!

All the splendid treasures of Xenia's apartment had been dismantled, and hidden away in the farthest one of the three secret apartments, where Magda Dumont had passed the first months of her strange married life!

Scattered around were many light packages of luggage—and,—out on the northern corridor,—at an open window, Serge Dumont, now completely arrayed for travel, was gazing northwardly over the darkened steppe to see the lights of Boursakoff's travelling carriage.

His heart beat high in happy anticipation!

A courier had arrived at midnight with the message that the faithful Nicolas, escorting the nun, had all the passports ready for their departure.

With an admirable sagacity, Serge Dumont designed to leave Khaminavatka at four o'clock—travel through sleeping Bratskoe, in a leisurely manner,—and then,—speed for life and death to the frontier!

Even now, the closed travelling carriage was all packed, save the last luggage in the courtyard,—nothing but the presence of the nun and Magda's clerical disguise being wanting!

"Poor Boursakoff!" sighed Serge. "He will be ready to sleep like a tired hound! Let him do so!

"When he wakes for my orders in the morning, he will find me fifty versts away! I will take the second Intendant!"

He grew tired of watching for that faint twinkling light which was to be the sign of his deliverance from his awful burden,—the fears for his beloved one,—his darling,—his dearly bought wife!

And, yet, even now, on the threshold of his deliverance, the forebodings of Father Adrian came back to oppress his wearied soul!

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"Even the most trifling thing," he mused, "the breaking of a wheel,—the fall of a horse,—a sudden sickness,—a drunken policeman's curiosity,—or some malignity of those wretches, over there,—could bring us both to ruin,—to shame,—perhaps,—to Siberia!"

And, then, disturbed at heart, Serge stole back to comfort the frightened beauty who waited for the gloomy robes of the Russian nun to hide her loveliness.

Already her silken hair had been cut, and laid away,—a hallowed treasure!

Serge paused a brief moment at the southern windows!

A sudden fear smote him as he noted the bright light shining out of the second story windows where the Princess Vera, with wolfish eyes, now awaited the signal of his death!

"Tell me, darling one," he softly said, "what windows are lit up over there." And, then, with a sudden start of horror, Magda Dumont cried, "Serge! Oh! My God! It is in my mother's rooms! She has returned! We are lost,—lost,—she will discover all!"

And, then, sadly did the lover husband plead with his beloved. "It is always the same,—the upper servants make merry when their lords are absent!

"Perhaps the mansion is to be used this summer,—there may be some visitors of rank." And, yet, with secret misgivings, he bade Xenia lead her mistress in to rest until he could descry the coming carriages of Boursakoff!

"Only a few hours more, Darling, and the White Lady of Khaminavatka will walk no more!

"But over there, in the happy west, in the spicy groves of Sicily, you shall forget all this year of trial,—our prison love,—you shall be free, darling, for love shall make you free!

"Once over the border, Youresief has to accept my story,—the government will be powerless to disprove it,—we can not fail!"

With a growing anxiety in his heart, Serge Dumont returned to his eyrie at the northern end of the gallery to watch for the twinkling lights of the two carriages!

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Suddenly, with a faint cry of joy, he sprang back to the room where Xenia was comforting her young mistress.

There were tears clinging to Magda Dumont's lashes as she gazed out across the darkened valley. "My mother! Oh! My mother!" she wailed, for it came to her lonely heart now that she had never really known a mother's love!

All her lonely childhood,—the long twelve years of absence at the Catherine Institute, returned to her mind. "I shall soon be a stranger in a strange land," she sobbed, and, looking down at the dreaming valley, whence the night wind brought all the freshening odors of the spring, she whispered: "Good-bye to Russia! Good-bye to the Dying Water! It is the end of all!"

Suddenly, her husband, her lover, her lord, clasped her in his arms! "They are coming—even now—my heart's own! In two hours you will be on your way to freedom,—out of the home of bondage!

"And,—then,—soon,—all our troubles will be cleared away,—for, Youresief is all powerful,—Barbe Federoff can marshall all the nobles to aid us,—and,—even the General and your brother, are reasonable human beings! There is only—" he ceased, for he saw the silent agony of her face, as she turned her wearied eyes to that light gleaming out across the stream,—a menacing signal!

"Serge, my beloved!" she whispered, "we have paid a fearful price for our happiness! I was not worth it! A poor simple girl." "You shall live to bless the memories of these days of danger which have drawn us heart to heart," he cried, as he kissed her trembling lips.

"Now, Xenia!" he cried, "hasten, for the traveller must have refreshment. Then, when you have changed our White Lady into a 'dark ladye,' we are off for Unghein!

"I will go down and meet Boursakoff! He must soon be here, rather," he hesitated, "I will unlock the doors of the three galleries, and, you can go down—tell him to await me,—and—then, bring the nun directly up here!"

At the end of the corridor, he watched the lights

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gleaming out now, not a mile away,—and he descended to the first gallery below.

The key was already turning in the door when a fearful shriek rang out from the rooms where his darling awaited his return!

Serge had scarcely left the room when Magda slipped through the open sliding door into her retreat, leaving Xenia arranging the little feast prepared to refresh Father Adrian's gentle messenger,—the bearer of the disguise, and passports, which were to carry "Sister Agatha" out of Russia, on a mission to the Superior of the Greek convent at Bucharest!

While Serge Dumont held Magda in his arms, three excited men had peered down through the circular windows of the roof, whence a faint glow of light showed the interior of the hidden nest of love.

"Here!" muttered the trembling betrayer, "this one is loose." They never thought that anyone could get up on the roof!"

"Give me the rope!" hissed Ivan, as he sprang to a chimney and quickly looped the double knotted rope around it! "Follow me, Arcady!" he muttered, as he threw the rope down, and slid boldly down into the vacant room!

Arcady was hardly beside him, when the form of Magda Dumont appeared at the door! The two avengers had sprung behind an armoire!

One glance told the young wife of the hostile surprise as she lifted her eyes at the current of cold air sweeping through the open scuttle! *It was the dreaded midnight surprise—at last!*

Palsied with fear, she turned to fly out, but she was crushed in her brother's strong arms.

"At last!" he growled. "The door—bar the door!" he shouted to Arcady, as Magda's voice rang out in a wild thrilling wail!

There was the sound of hurrying feet, and Arcady, fumbling with the slide, was hastily thrust aside by Serge Dumont, who leaped headlong into the room!

"Kill him!" cried Arcady. "Do as you will! They are ours!"

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Ivan Radovich, with his left hand, supported his fainting sister's form, and then his right stole to his pistol holster!

As he threw up the heavy revolver, the click awakened the wife's lion heart!

Throwing her arms around her maddened brother, she screamed: *"Hold! He is my husband!"*

It was too late, for a heavy report rang out, and the room was filled with stifling smoke!

Serge Dumont staggered back, but, flung himself like a lion upon the man who now vainly tried to cock the weapon for a deadly shot! "Harlot! You lie!" yelled Arcady, as he rushed toward Serge Dumont, knife in hand!

There was a gliding sound, the flash of a glittering blade, and, Arcady Radovich pitched forward upon his face—dead before he reached the floor!

Xenia, with blazing eyes, threw herself between the two men. "Barin!" she solemnly said, as Arcady's life blood stained her shoes, standing there beside the man whom she had killed! "Here,—in this very room,—Father Adrian married them! You would kill your brother! Ah! My God,—she is dead!

And then the brave woman, who had saved Serge's life, fell on her knees beside the senseless body of the White Lady of Khaminavatka!

"Is this true—on the cross?" gasped Ivan, as he gazed at his reeling and helpless enemy, whom he had easily pushed away from him!

"She has been my wife—for a year," faltered Serge, as he sank slowly to the floor. He was at his enemy's mercy now!

With a groan, Ivan hurled his smoking pistol out through the open window, and turned to Xenia. "Tell me that she lives—we must have help! Help!" he cried.

And—then—there was a loud crash,—as Tourko and Sergeant Michaelovitch, sword in hand, came dashing along the corridor. Upon the silence of the night, in an instant, broke out the wild alarm of the Intendant's bell!

Upon the roof was heard the confused sound of hurrying feet, and,—before stout Nicolas Boursakoff could

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reach the upper corridor,—all the waiting marauders had slid down the rope ladder and the whole band were soon in a wild retreat to the sedgy river!

It was the wild-eyed coachman who led in the mad stampede,—and who was the first to reach the Princess Vera,—with the news that both the Radovichs were dead.

And,—then,—a wailing and guilty thing sobbed and writhed under the ministrations of the frightened scoundrel,—shivering in the fear of the coming dawn!

She had seen every window of Khaminavatka suddenly lit up,—and the wild notes of the alarm bell had pealed out across the Dying Water its message of failure and of horror. The attack had failed! "Ivan,—my Ivan!" she cried, "I sent you to your death!"

But a moment did Ivan Radovich linger irresolute, as he gazed at the two men lying on the floor! His strong arms lifted his sister and tenderly he laid her on the bed!

He was now sobbing, "Magda,—my own Magda,—look up! My darling! I forgive! I know all! Look up! Speak to me!" when Tourko and the Sergeant rushed into the room! And, this sight disarmed their fury!

It was Xenia who led them back into her own room, their eyes staring as they gazed on the hidden Paradise, with speechless surprise.

Cries and yells resounded without as Nicolas Boursakoff strode into Xenia's parlors. "Hasten!" the devoted woman cried. "Here is the Barin wounded nigh to death!

"Send a courier,—two,—on the gallop, for Prince Youresief—and,—the Doctor Boris Yaroslaw! Tell them to ride like the wind! Send, too, for the Police Doctor at Bratskoe!

"But, no police! Say that it was an accident!"

When Tourko leaped away to do Boursakoff's bidding, Xenia led him into the room where Ivan Radovich, kneeling at his enemy's side, was quickly twisting a handkerchief around Serge Dumont's bleeding arm!

"What is all this?" cried the Intendant, starting back, as he recognized their mortal foe,

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"They drove her half crazy," said Xenia, pointing to the still senseless Magda. "We sheltered her here. The Barin was married to her by Father Adrian,—they searched secretly for her! You know the rest! This dead dog!" she cried, spurning Arcady's body with her foot, "led her brother in here to murder our young master!

"And now, Nicolas Boursakoff, you know the White Lady of Khaminavatka, at last! You know why I played the lady, to save our darling!

"Help me to carry her into my own room,—then,—send back Tourko and the Sergeant. They must not talk!

"Send Anna Ivanowna here—and none of the three shall leave me.

"No one must know but Prince Youresief,—to save my beloved master and mistress! Send the people all home! Quick, or—we are lost!"

In half an hour, Anna Ivanowna and Xenia, alone, watched by Magda Dumont, who slept the sleep of a tired child, for the resolute peasant woman had given her a potion to bring on a blessed self-forgetfulness!

It was by Serge's bedside that Boursakoff knelt and talked in a low tone with the now repentant Ivan, who was dazed by the sudden termination of his blood feud!

"What shall I do, Barin?" soberly said Boursakoff.

"Get your men and take Arcady's body decently, over the river to the mansion! I will send a letter to Princess Vera Orbeleff, who is there!

"There must be no police here—not a word of anything but an accident to Major Dumont! I will handle the whole affair myself with Prince Youresief!

"When you have sent off this body, take your best carriage and bring Madame Cherikoff here to nurse my brother-in-law!

"Tell her that I will remain here—until she can come to be the companion of my dear sister! Then, I will ride over in the morning, and see the Princess Vera.

"We will handle this whole affair.

"Let us now take him down to his own rooms, below,

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for the Police Doctor will be here in an hour! Then,—even he,—will know nothing!"

It was with joy that Xenia and Anna Ivanowna aided the two anxious men to effect Barin Serge's removal—and, before dawn,—the surgeon in charge had pronounced the wounded man's recovery to be only a matter of a few weeks. The heavy ball had only plowed an ugly furrow in the shoulder muscles!

By the side of the wounded husband lover,—the pale-faced nun sat now in attendance, when Madame Olga Cherikoff arrived to hear Ivan Radovich's wonderful story of a misdirected vengeance!

"You,—dear Olga, are to be mistress here,—until I can return and have Serge grant me his forgiveness! There is much to do! Seal your lips! For, both Serge and Magda's fate hangs now on our prudence!"

They were both seated in the drawing-room of the hostile castle,—hostile no more,—by Love's metamorphosis and the failure of the useless craft of Arcady Radovich.

The sunlight had come again to gild the beautiful spring landscape—when Xenia entered to say that the "Barin Captain's carriage was awaiting him!"

The two anxious ones started, in surprise, to see the promoted beauty clad, again, in her plain peasant robes!

"I am a lady no longer,—only the peasant-born girl!" she simply said. "You—and all—must know—that I only played the Barina, to save Magda Radovich's life! But—now—she is my dearest Barina—and—I am only a serf-born village woman again! And,—there is blood on my hand," she sobbed.

"Xenia!" cried Ivan, "forget how Arcady Radovich died,—for—you saved me from killing my sister's husband,—perhaps, my sister, too!"

"I can not forget," sobbed the woman, who had only struck blindly to save her beloved master's life!

And,—then,—she fell on her knees before the sacred icon as the sweet-faced Olga Cherikoff glided up stairs to clasp the one who had come back from the dead to her loving breast!

"No one must know—of this, Ivan," she said, "until Youresief comes, for Ratzo would ruin us all!"

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And,—then, the now composed Boursakoff drove Captain Ivan Radovich over to the mansion where Princess Vera had awaited the news of the slaughter of her lover.

"I have already done all to quiet the whole affair, Barin," said Boursakoff. "The two men will not leave the Doctor for an instant! I've sent all the peasants away to the field.

"Xenia will keep the three upstairs who saw the end of the trouble—and,—you—and Barin Serge will have it all your own way! God be thanked that the blood quarrel is over forever!"

And,—the memory of Arcady Radovich passed out of the memory of man, from that very day, for only Ivan and the Intendant at the mansion of his birth knew of the sodded mound which blankly marked his hidden grave!

As he was never known to have returned,—the Kherson gossips long waited to hear of some new outbreak of the man who went unmourned to his grave,—the mad Radovich!

"Be sure to escort the Doctor back yourself," said the shaken Ivan, as he bade adieu to the Intendant, on the steps of his father's house. "Take a horse and gallop back! I want your carriage."

When the pale-faced young officer entered the rooms where Princess Vera awaited him, she flung herself into his arms with a wild cry of passionate love!

There was a long and fateful conference between the startled lovers, and—then, both saw but one means of securing their own safety. "Youresief will be here in a day, with Doctor Boris,—the Police General may follow.

"The whole tragedy must be kept from Madame Federoff, from Ratzo, from the General and your father!

"There is but one way to explain *our* presence here," said Vera Orbeleff, reading the same conclusion in her lover's eyes. "We will take this carriage, drive into the villa, send for the village priest, be married, and return here.

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"Then—the old Marechale de Noblesse will see at once our reason for the little masquerade here,—otherwise,—our own ruin may follow on the exposure of Serge and Magda! Do you know, Ivan," faltered the loving woman, "if you had died instead of Arcady, to-night would have been my last on earth!"

There was no falsehood in her eyes,—she spoke but the truth,—and,—then,—with a manly memory of his oath,—Major Ivan Radovich said, "Vera! There is no blood on my hand! Come—we will not face any of them,—till we are married—and,—this will help to save them!

"Do you know we have all been blind! I never even dreamed that Serge Dumont could have married Magda! Did you not ever think of it?"

The Princess Vera, pale-faced, clasped her lover's hands. "We have all been groping in the dark! The dead has come back,—and—to-day, brings us Love's miracle!

"For, Ivan, you and I will face the world together now,—there are only the two heads of your family at Saint Petersburg to placate!" "I fear that we, as well as Serge and Magda, will have their bitter enmity!"

"I know a way to easily control them," grimly said Vera, as she descended to her carriage. "And if I mistake not, Youresief will do the rest!"

Across the Dying Water there reigned the silence of a forced calm! Only a few words fell from Barin Serge Dumont's lips as he recovered from his sleeping potions.

"Send instantly for Father Adrian!" he murmured to Boursakoff, and then his head fell back, until Olga Cherikoff led in a lovely vision in white robes,—the gentler Lady of Khaminavatka!

With a glad cry, Magda sprang to her husband's side and laid her gentle head upon his breast!

"Be bright-hearted, little one!" he murmured. "You shall yet see Italy, for, the worst is over now. It is through night to light! Youresief will save us now, with good Father Adrian to help!"

When Xenia stood before them, in her gayly embroid-

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ered peasant garb, her borrowed finery all laid away, Serge Dumont smiled faintly.

He saw the proud woman's sign of release from her false position, the escape from wearing the silken badges of shame!

"Come here, Xenia!" he softly said. "You can be a peasant girl at Khaminavatka, in Russia, as long as you will! When we go to Italy, you shall be a Barina, to the end of your days. For, you saved my life!"

And, then, the White Lady of Khaminavatka clasped her humble sister to her grateful heart! "Xenia! Xenia!" she cried, "you are my sister forever!"

When Madame Olga Cherikoff drew off her choicest diamond and turquoise ring and pressed it upon Xenia's finger, she said, severely, "You must obey me, for I am mistress here, now! I am the Lady of Khaminavatka for a time!"

Before sunset, the return of Major Barin Ivan Radovich in the carriage enabled him to assure himself that the whole misdirected affray had been adroitly hushed up!

He had attended to his own Intendant's injunctions of secrecy, and the whole countryside merely knew that Baron Serge Dumont, on the eve of travel, had injured himself accidentally with his own revolver!

It was Olga Cherikoff's turn to meet the surprise of her life, when Ivan drew her aside,—"Youresief arrives to-night," he said. "I shall not come again, till he has gone. You will find us over there, or at the villa, for Princess Vera is now my wife,—and, I wish you to let the Prince know!

"We were married to-day at Bratskoe—and, of course, I shall never bring her to see Serge and Magda, till their marriage is openly proclaimed, but you can now tell them all."

While over the flowering prairies, the fleet troikas were speeding to Khaminavatka, bringing Prince Youresief and the old Doctor to the rescue, and Father Adrian, also, to witness the very catastrophe which he had feared, the alert-minded Princess Vera Radovich walked the

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floor of Baroness Lili's salon, in a study of the strange chess-board of fate!

She shuddered over the gulf which had yawned before her—and,—at last,—saw that only a mad thirst for Serge Dumont's blood had led the dead Arcady on to his fatal mistake!

But, with a wonderful acumen, she sought to even make a new capital out of the happy ending of the unforeseen tragedy.

To her youthful husband, the crafty Princess confided all her material plans! "You can go over there, for Serge and Magda are one,—Youresief and Doctor Yaroslaw are to be trusted,—and,—this Father Adrian is of our oldest noblesse! Say nothing,—do nothing,—but go over at once and become one in heart with your sister and her husband!

"At any rate, it doubles the strength of your family, it pacifies the Kherson, it has brought you and I together! But, remember, no one can handle the General and your father but myself! No one can placate the Czar but Youresief!

"And, our marriage must only be divulged at Saint Petersburg by Prince Youresief. If you can prevent Serge writing to the Excellence Barbe Federoff, if all of us keep silence as to your mother, father and the General, I have a plan to draw a substantial profit from this whole sudden tumult! General Ratzo must be kept hoodwinked!

"Olga Cherikoff and our three Intendants can easily quiet all the peasant gossip, and Father Adrian, if he comes, can bring in the village Pope to aid! You must simply go over to your sister, and, our new brother," she bitterly sneered, "but, avoid Youresief!

"Let him come over here and see me, but only after he and the Dumonts, with Father Adrian, have made up their plans!"

"What is the best thing to do, to avoid trouble at court?" asked Ivan, in wonder at his wife's acuteness.

"First, to get these people at once over the frontier, if Serge can be moved, until our own hands are out of the lion's mouth.

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"Then, for Prince Youresief, after Serge leaves Father Adrian as his secret representative, to go at once to Petersburg, and then, get a permission for the public marriage, on the ground that this imprudent love match *antedated* the appointment as Maid of Honor!" Major Ivan's eyes kindled!

"That is, if Adrian, once a man of the world, will lie like a gentleman, to save the destinies of two families—and,—to end the Kherson feud! There is but one fatal obstacle! My father and mother will never consent!" gloomily concluded Ivan.

"They will control the General; they will see their grand opportunity for a crushing revenge!"

"Wait, wait, my Ivan!" confidently answered Princess Vera, "until the Prince and I have done with them! You shall see them bend, for they all fear Youresief, who could bring General Ratzo down on them for this breach of the truce—and,—I hold your uncle's destiny in the hollow of my hand,—there is a power nearer the throne than even an Imperial Aide de Camp!

"But, I must not now meet Magda, nor the Lord of Khaminavatka! I am now only the architect of your fortunes—and,—of my own happiness! Can you blame me, Ivan?"

"It shall be as you say—I see the awkwardness of our meeting. It must seem as if the Czar had arranged it all—on Prince Youresief's representation!" "Precisely," dryly answered Vera, with dreamy eyes.

"Your father must rejoin your mother,—Serge and Magda can travel abroad for a couple of seasons,—General Radovich will watch over our interests at court—and,—you and I,—will go on our pilgrimage of Love! I have a surprise for you,—one that I had intended to keep till after our brilliant wedding, but it will come to us here, when Youresief has made our peace! We were on the brink of ruin, my Ivan!"

"I know it, I see it," he cried, as he folded her to his breast! And so the bright plumaged falcon fluttered into a dove's nest, with becoming humility!

It was late that night when Ivan rode his charger back from the steppe palace. The reins lay idle on the

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horse's neck as he crossed the ford where he had marshalled his waiting murderers in the night.

He pondered over the words of Serge Dumont, who, even while writhing with the fever of his wound, saw the value of the quick witted Vera's advice.

On his knees, Ivan had implored pardon for the unfulfilled murder lurking in his heart! "Say no more, Ivan," kindly replied Serge. "You were wrought upon, you might have known that I would not dishonor this dear one of ours! And I believe Arcady to have been mad—mad for years! She must never know the whole truth." And Serge then pointed feebly upstairs to where Magda awaited Prince Youresief's coming.

"If Boris Yaroslaw and Father Adrian will convoy me, we will at once get over the frontier, and halt at Lemberg, till Prince Youresief can telegraph me there! He arrives to-night! I will send him to you to-morrow.

"Say nothing of the past, and, for the sake of both Vera and Magda, let her bring the old Marechale de Noblesse around! Remember—I was injured by mere accident—dropping my own loaded revolver! And I will send Olga Cherikoff over to bring you to us, for your adieu!

"Our whole safety lies in concealing the facts of our double marriage, until the Prince has made us all safe! For, Magda is the bond of an eternal peace between us! You and I and Vera can keep these secrets—forever!

"Why should the others know? I will keep silence with all my family,—you do the same with yours—and, —all will be well! We must not meet publicly until it is out of General Ratzo's power to unfold the secret history of these strange bridals!" Both the young men were now one in heart and grasped at this means of safety!

When Ivan Radovich told the whole story to his brilliant wife—she mused apart, with a thoughtful face! "The best thing that I can do—if Serge and Magda go away—is to take charge of the Bratskoe villa,—fill it up with merrymakers,—you can return to Kief,—and,—when Prince Youresief telegraphs to Baron Serge at Lemberg,—then let him telegraph also to you at Kief.

"For, I have the last act—to arrange—at Saint Petersburg,—a little surprise!

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"In this way,—the local noblesse,—the Headquarters at Kief,—and the whole of Kherson will look at the end of the feud as being officially directed from Saint Petersburg.

"Once that it is thought to be the work of the Czar—then—all will bow!" There was wisdom in the keen-eyed young bride's advice—and—safety, too!

The young bridegroom marveled at the clear discernment of his resolute wife! "You will get a leave of absence—Ivan—and—Olga Cherikoff will watch over these estates, while you come with me to my own little nest, my petit pied à terre,—near Bobrinetz! The Youresiefs will entertain us—and—so—our marriage will be gaily lancée." The whole future seemed to be gleaming in gold and rose color to them now!

That night, when Prince Youresief led Doctor Boris Yaroslaw across the threshold of Khaminavatka, he was astounded to be met by the pacid-faced Xenia in her peasant garb.

The blue head handkerchief,—the white linen blouse, with its crimson embroidered yoke and blue cuffs,—the village-made apron of gaudy dize, her blue serge petticoat,—the rich sash,—the earrings beloved in Little Russia,—and the chain of gilt beads, with the pendant cross, were classic in serfdom.

"If the Barin will follow me"—she murmured,—as she dropped her eyes under his piercing gaze. "A falling off here"—growled the astonished Prince. "I do believe that this old rathole is haunted! Nothing happens here, but, some new devilish surprise!" And—with a gloomy face, he followed his surgical friend until Anna Ivanowna,—demure in her black silken gown and proud of her silver key chain, showed them to their rooms.

Prince Gregory, an old philosopher, wondered at the apparent abasement of the peasant Queen of Khaminavatka, and secretly contemplated Anna Ivanowna's rosy cheeks! "It is the same,—all the world over"—he sighed. "The mantle of Elisha is fallen upon Elijah!"

But, he was wary,—while Dr. Boris Yaroslaw was busied at the bedside of the wounded noble with his def-

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erential professional brother,—the Police Surgeon of Bratskoe.

For—the impassive Nicolas Boursakoff, in attendance upon the Marechale de Noblesse,— simply rehearsed the story of the accident to his master—and—so—prepared the old Prince for the arrival of Father Adrian! "We feared the wound might be mortal"—said the Intendant —"and so, sent an express for our Barin's beloved friend, who came to us at Easter!"

"Has Madame Federoff been sent for?" demanded the old veteran.

"No! Barin!" hastily said the Intendant. "It was Barin Serge's first wish that she should not be alarmed!"

"Something rotten in the State of Denmark!" growled the Prince, as Boursakoff, uneasy at heart, fled away to prepare to receive the welcome priest, for a courier had dashed up, announcing Father Adrian's expected arrival in three hours!

"What news?" demanded Youresief, as he stalked into the library, where Doctor Boris now awaited him. "A splendid constitution,—rallying marvelously,—an ugly, plowing bullet wound—must have been fired at short range," soliloquized the Surgeon—"and,—really,—our local brother has done very well! He'll be right as a trivet, soon,—but—bless me,—go up,—he asks for you!"

Then—unconscious of his betrayal of his patient,—Doctor Boris Yaroslaw followed the blushing Anna Ivanowna to where a dinner of choice awaited him.

"I wonder"—mused Youresief—as he mounted the stair, led by Xenia, with downcast eyes—"if there was a quarrel over this comely bit of deviltry—or,—did she herself give him a touch of the tiger claw! The younger girl seems to be now en reine—however,—here goes!" The Doctor had seen many a queer social tableau from his pillar of professional isolation!

The old noble's resentment faded away at the sight of Serge Dumont's pale face! "Come close to me,—Gregory"—the young man murmured. "I have much to tell you,—before Father Adrian comes—for—you alone must know,—you only,—save Adrian! To-morrow night, I must be on my way over the frontier!"

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"Are you mad—Serge?" cried the astounded Marechale de Noblesse! "Is it a duel? Have you killed——"

"No one!" feebly said Serge! "Listen! For,—on you,—now hangs the fate of two families,—the old enmity must be buried forever—and—you alone—can be the peacemaker! It is not the Radovichs—it is the dread resentment of the Czar—that I fear!" And, then Serge unbosomed himself in peace.

Gregory Youresief's wrinkled face was marked by a stern pallor as he was unwillingly dragged away by the two surgeons, and escorted to the dining-room,—an hour later!

"See here, Boris"—said the Prince. "You know I must see him again,—to-night!"

"Be reasonable!" replied the Surgeon. "He will see this meddling priest,—he swears! Take a good dinner,—a long sleep,—and,—at ten to-morrow,—you can have him for an hour! You do not want to throw him back into a fever!"

And so, the old noble submitted to the ministrations of Xenia, who waited alone upon him at the table!

In vain, when the feast was done, he tried to take her hand and thank her for her noble devotion! "I am going to set it all right!

"The Barin has told me everything! You are a pride of our people,—a true-hearted Russian girl!"

"I serve the Barin honestly," she faltered—and then, fled away to the protection of the now restored Lady of Khaminavatka!

The old Prince that night walked the south terrace alone for hours, lingering over his Partaga—and curiously eyeing the mansion across the Dying Water.

There—the second floor was still illuminated!

"I would give ten thousand roubles," he mused, knocking the ash off his cigar, "to know just how much of this—is that pretty little tiger cat's work—my friend Vera,—over there! If there is no meddling,—I may be able to save them,—but—there is this old fool,—the Minister of War!

"This snap marriage will surely make him a secret enemy—bitter—implacable,—untiring.

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"And—the two Radovichs—they will, of course, refuse their consent!

"I must use the heaviest pressure! We will see! We will see! I shall let the Priest Adrian alone! I must know nothing—but,—they should certainly get out of Russia,—until,—I have clipped the claws of these two Petersburg wolves!

"And—so,—the Princess Vera has snared young Ivan! General Andrè will try to crush them—for,—he is left to dance the pas seul! Ah! I will ride over and see the young witch, to-morrow morning! She can help me,—she must,—for I can help her,—if she dances to my music! What a sly little devil it is! At the last,—she is a Kherson grandee,—after all! The reward of conscious virtue!"

While Prince Youresief sought counsel of the stars as to his course in the long and delicate negotiations suddenly thrust upon him, he was only concerned with arranging a plan of action which should forever end the warfare along the Dying Water!

"The favor of the Czar, I may reasonably hope for," he soliloquized, "with a skillful presentment of white lies,—and Father Adrian's secret aid—I must never break in upon the Priest's secret! It is for him to handle the Metropolitan of Russia! There is the Minister of War also to be placated,—but, for General Radovich,—the Baron Alexandre,—and Madame Lili, the reckless,—only force or fear will do the work there! And how"—there, he was left in a quandary!

Suddenly Xenia, even more handsome in her peasant garb, proudly worn,—than the borrowed finery of her months of glory, stood before him. "Barin! The Father Adrian waits for you, at supper! He bids me ask you to join him!" "I have it!" cried the Prince. "This woman's face has given me the clue! Anton's little story will do the business!"

He stayed the woman with a courteous wave of his hand. "How many children have you?" he graciously asked.

"Two boys,—Barin!" she curtsied. "I shall steal one

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of them from you, Xenia," he said kindly, "and make him a man! If Barin Serge will spare me one,—he shall be educated at Kharkov, and then he can ride over here from Bobrinetz and see his brother,—when he is my Intendant! You have earned it!"

It was a singular duel of cordial greetings and hollow ignoring of the excitable events, between the silver-haired noble and the dark-eyed sturdy young Priest! Doctor Boris Yaroslaw, an excellent trencherman, supplied the necessary negative element.

With a cordial bonhomie, the Prince learned of Father Adrian's intention to escort Baron Serge Dumont to the frontier!

"I have permitted it," gravely said Doctor Yaroslaw. "There is an excellent nurse here,—a nun,—and, —I shall myself go as far as Unghein, with them," remarked the Surgeon! Both the men on whom Serge's salvation now depended ignored the presence of the hidden beauty, who had walked the dim shades of the Park, —the silent galleries, and the battlemented roof, for the last time, as the White Lady.

"Then, I am free to return to Bobrinetz—to-morrow—Doctor?" said the Prince with a meaning glance.

"Precisely so!" merrily said Yaroslaw, "Father Adrian and I will later return together—and,—he has already promised to drop me at Bobrinetz."

"Where,—you will be my wife's guest,—for a week!" heartily cried Gregory Youresief. "For, though I am going on to Petersburg—my wife and my old comrade in arms here,—will do the honors!"

There was a grateful flash in Father Adrian's eyes, as he noted the exquisite courtesy of the Marechale de Noblesse in not trenching upon the hidden mystery. There was much yet to do,—danger breakers still ahead!

For, even with Serge's hopeful views,—with the soft enchantment of Magda's eyes,—Father Adrian knew the dangers before them all! One malignant whisper—and —the terrible hand of the Czar might crush them all! For his own innocent double dealing he had no remorse.

"To save their lives!" he murmured. "I can atone,— by fasting and prayer!" And,—then—with the breath

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of the opening roses stealing in at the opened windows, the dormant man in his nature, awakened to recall a dead lost love of olden days,—a love which had drifted him finally into the gloomy walls of the church,—a man whose heart was rightly framed for life and love,—for joys nearer than these, beyond the shadowy gates of Death.

Silence, peace and security wrapped the strangely assorted household in this long night of many far-fetched plans of daring audacity,—and,—awake at early dawn,—after a walk among the dew-gemmed flowers—Prince Gregory Youresief was ready for his last day's duties!

He burned to be on that long road to the Neva before rumor could reach the dangerous enemies now awaiting some news of Arcady Radovich's final destination!

But, serenely confident in Ivan's dashing nerve,—the brothers, now in the full tide of success, never dreamed of Arcady's mad inroad upon the dangerous steppes, where the police even now looked for his sneaking return. And—they knew not that his dangerous specter had vanished forever from the eyes of men!

When Xenia led Prince Youresief in to Serge Dumont's room,—after the Doctor's had finished their morning conclave,—Serge turned to the faithful woman who had guarded his hidden treasure. "Bring her here,—Xenia," he murmured. "For,—the Prince is going—and,—we must thank our kind friend, together!"

The two men had concluded their brief conclave as the pale White Rose glided into the sick chamber.

"I need all my strength—Magda darling," feebly said Serge—"for our long journey, which begins to-night!

"Thank Prince Youresief, who goes to gain us the liberty of our lives,—the right to live and love here,—on the Dying Water! He knows all! If the Czar pardons us,—it will be his noble work—and,—with him rests,—our exile for life—or—our happiness,—the peace and prosperity of Ivan and the Princess Vera,—the end of the bitterly drawn out Kherson vendetta!"

The gentle girl held out her trembling hands—and—laid her tired head on the old man's breast, as he kissed her brow! "Fear nothing, my dear child! Cleave to

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him, be silent,—write nothing,—until you hear from me, —and—I will only demand one thing on your return! Bring back roses on your cheeks—for, it is the time of roses, with both of you!

"Trust me in all,—the Czar is merciful—and,—God is good! You shall hear all soon at Lemberg! I never was defeated yet"—said the gallant old General—"and,—*this is the fight of my life.*"

He stole away then—and left the lovers together—their happy eyes busy with love's language,—as the fair girl leaned over the man whose life was now mingled with her own. A sweet and touching picture—the White Lady of Khaminavatka—and her wounded lord!

With solemn state,—Nicolas Boursakoff conducted the Prince Youresief to the lonely mansion on the Dying Water, where the Princess Vera Radovich now awaited him in a singular unrest.

It was a matter of trying diplomacy for the old veteran to appear casually unconcerned, as the radiant young schemer advanced to meet him, in the drawing room where Lili Radovich had reigned before her.

But, Major Ivan, with a cordial bonhomie, accepted the Prince's congratulations and—then effaced himself.

"I will make but a brief stay, Baron Ivan," said the Prince,—"as I leave for Saint Petersburg, this evening—and,—so I may charge myself with Madame's commissions."

The young husband disappeared,—on hospitable thoughts intent,—while Youresief drew the happy Vera to a sofa! "You madcap!" he gravely said! "Tell me, —what shall I do—or not do—for you, at Saint Petersburg! We must be brief! You well know what I go for,—and—your woman wit may aid me!"

In half an hour,—the Marechale de Noblesse rose. "You are a wonder,—a witch! I see the rift in the cloud now! And,—I count on you to ensure the absolute silence of the whole countryside here now!

"When I have tamed the General and the Baron,—the latter can rejoin his wife for a season abroad,—General Andrè can come down here to Bratskoe."

"And,—I shall be your neighbor, Prince," she cried

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gaily. "For my honeymoon near you in my petit pied à terre!" "I do trust you, Vera"—said the Prince—"and, if you are true to us in this juncture,—Ivan's interests shall not suffer! I will telegraph him to Kief,—and—you must remain here and at Bratskoe till I am done! But,—never mention the name of Serge and Magda—until we all meet in happier times!"

When he had kissed her fair hands—she timidly handed him a letter. "You will deliver this,—the last,—for Ivan's sake!"

She fled away with a crimsoning face—as the startled Prince received her last communication to the Minister of War. "You will know what to do—what to say! Prince"—heartily cried Ivan, as the veteran stepped into his carriage.

"I shall stand by Serge and Magda now—to the end!"

"Go over there before sunset and say 'good bye'—Ivan," replied the Prince—"for, I leave at four—and they must soon be over the border. They leave tonight!" he whispered. "For God's sake, let no one know—not even—the wonderful Vera!"

It was three weeks later when Prince Gregory Youresief sat facing General Radovich and the wandering-eyed Baron Alexandre, in a private room, in the Ministry of War at Saint Petersburg.

His telegrams from Lemberg and Bratskoe had assured him of the perfect success of every part of the plan of quiet escape.

And—Baroness Magda Dumont had telegraphed to Father Adrian, now in Saint Petersburg, her happy news of Serge's wonderful progress toward health.

It was in the stronghold of his friend and fellow campaigner of the old days that the wily Marechale de Noblesse had called up the two secretly quaking brothers, who feared their plans of gold grabbing had miscarried!

With the powerful influence of the Minister of War,—with the secret knowledge that Father Adrian had propitiated the Metropolitan of Russia,—it only needed the formal written consent of Baron Alexandre Radovich to obtain the priceless permission of the Czar to unite the

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two warring families in the marriage which should bury forever the old blood feud!

At Tsarskoe Zeloe, the veteran Prince had already been graciously received by his august sovereigns.

Already an audience was arranged, where the Metropolitan, with Father Adrian in attendance, would support the personal request of the Marechale de Noblesse who waited but for the one sealed paper, to telegraph to Lemberg,—and,—upon a public marriage there,—then the Lord and Lady of Khaminavatka were free to seek the enchanting shores of Sorrento,—the vista of their happy dreams!

Both the brothers had furtively watched Prince Youresief's arrival and mysterious activity with secret misgivings,—and—they dreaded his unexampled influence with the Minister of War—the man whose single frown could effect their financial ruin! For, they feared the stopping of the Pactolean golden flood!

It was with a stern, unmoved countenance that Prince Youresief related the artfully prepared story of Arcady's murderous sally upon Khaminavatka,—of Ivan's participation,—and,—of the astounding discovery in the palace of the steppes!

"Tricked,—by God!" shouted Baron Alexandre! "She shall die in a nunnery,—locked in four walls!"

"And I—go to the Emperor—to demand the instant arrest of this cowardly scoundrel," pitilessly cried General Andrè.

"You know the penalty for the abduction of a Maid of Honor! It is high treason! He shall forfeit his estate,—and drag his life out in chains! At last,—the power of the Dumonts is broken!"

And both the cowards turned instantly into bullies, as they sprang up to repair to the Ministry of Police.

With a menacing gesture—Prince Gregory Youresief threw himself before the door!

"Hold! Madmen!" he sternly said! "First, both your daughter and the man whom she will marry are now safely out of Russia! You will sign this formal consent to the marriage,—Baron Alexandre! For, both Ivan and Madame Cherikoff join their prayers to my wishes!

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They alone know all!" "I will die first!" shouted the vindictive father.

"Both of you, may"—pitilessly exclaimed Prince Youresief. "I have here my carriage! We will go together to the Minister of Police!

"I was about to deposit with him the sealed full confession of Anton Antonovitch, station keeper, which divulges the whole details of Baron Pierre Dumont's murder—effected by Arcady, under your orders,—partly paid for by both of you—and,—of which the Excellence Serge Dumont is, as yet, ignorant!

"While we wait for the carriage to come up,—I will go in to the Minister and leave him also General Ratzo's report upon your spoliations of the Czar under your existing contracts! One of your thriving Jew associates has made a clean breast of the whole affair—and—naturally—it will ruin Major Ivan!"

There was a choking sound as Alexandre Radovich whirled around—and, fell into a chair, purpling in the face.

"Only a fit, General"—said the agnostic Youresief. "I will see the Minister of War—and send in a surgeon! Loosen his collar!"

But, as Prince Youresief reached the door,—General Radovich, a tottering, shivering wreck, clutched at his sleeve!

"Stay—stay—for God's sake! We will do anything! Anything you ask!" For, the stricken Baron has recovered his self-control and, feebly pleading, waved his hands in abject supplication!

Then, Gregory Youresief silently locked the door and, springing to Baron Alexandre's side, held out the paper, his flashing eyes piercing the wretch's thin mask of repentance.

"Ah! I see! A bully one minute,—a coward,—the next! Your blameless child has saved your life!

"I will keep your fearful secret,—for the dead can not be brought back! I would not embitter Serge Dumont's happy married life! I learned this whole damnable story but a few days ago,—after my arrival here!

"You both deserve the full measure of justice! Lis-

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ten! I exact that you, Alexandre, leave Russia, and live at Ulitza,—with the Baroness Lili.

"You can make any arrangements with Ivan you wish as to the income of your estate, but,—it must be given over to Ivan,—at once,—in full ownership.

"And—this wretch shall furnish you the means to live, —and give up his contracts, placing the benefits to accrue yet, in Ivan's name! I shall see that neither of you ever get another contract!

"And—for you, Andrè Radovich,—I leave you unshamed, in your place—on your oath that you will never practice against Serge Dumont in your life,—that you leave the Bratskoe estate to Magda Dumont, the wife of Excellence Serge,—your victim's brother—and,—the man who writhes to-day under Ivan's bullet! I will hold these two documents—and—so—I know what honor will not do,—fear and force will! Do you swear, Andrè?"

"I do," muttered the humbled noble! "Then, kiss the cross," cried the irate old patrician—taking off his Saint George!

"Now, sir! Sign," sternly said Youresief, as he laid the paper down before Alexandre. When the signature was affixed, the old Prince carefully folded up the paper. "I will see you here, in two days,—at the same time!

"In the mean time, know that these two papers, sealed with my crest—will always be in the keeping of the Minister of War! I give you two days to prepare the papers —and, give them to me, here! It would do you no good to try to assassinate me! So,—spare yourself the trouble!"

"For God's sake!" pleaded General Andrè—"destroy them! Think of the ruin to our family if they should be discovered!"

"I will prevent that!" coolly said the Marechale de Noblesse. "When the Excellence Baron Serge Dumont brings his wife home,—after their two years' wedding tour,—the sealed papers, deposited here in the Imperial Bank, for her—shall be delivered over to her husband to lie here unopened, just as long as my assassination, or his, does not finish out your record!

"For, you have made murder a trade—down in the

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Kherson,—and, now you are paying the price! You are safe,—for Magda's sweet sake,—the innocent child whom you would have used as a bait for your damnable schemes!

"I have clipped your claws now! I fear you not! And—remember, my silence depends only on your implicit obedience! You—Alexandre will leave here by Eydtkunen and not return to the Kherson! Ivan will attend to your family business!

"As for you—Andrè—I will have need of you—and for the sake of the cloth you wear,—I spare you public shame!

"The Minister of War will have a family communication for you—after we meet here again! Until then,—do not approach him! If you do,—I am absolved from all my pledges—and, will not delay your punishment!"

The old patrician stalked out of the room without turning his head—and—as he disappeared in the Minister's office, the frightened wretches fled away!

It was half an hour before the letter which Prince Youresief had handed to the Minister of War was finally folded up and hidden in the old functionary's bosom. "You return to Bobrinetz, my dear Gregory?" said the Minister, trembling with a secret rage,—for he had slowly digested the letter in which Princess Vera Radovich, with much finesse, had conveyed to her beloved Numa Pompilius,—her reminder of his promise to make Major Ivan Radovich a Colonel.

"I do, in two days! my dear colleague!" said Youresief, marveling at the great official's marked trepidation!

"I will send a brief letter to the lovely bride,—in your strict personal care, Gregory!" drily said the Minister. "It appears that Princess Vera Orbeleff has married that young Hotspur,—Ivan Radovich!

"It is a signal feat of diplomacy on her part, and—it deserves my passing notice! She modestly asks him to be named a Colonel, on the staff of the Grand Duke Michael at Moscow! I shall promote him—to please her —*at once!*" growled the old man,—who had seen his Egeria flit away forever from his ashen, wintry life!

"There is an excellent place to be filled—at once"—he

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grimly said—"the Governorship of Tomsk,—*in Siberia!* And,—it carries much distinction,—the rank of Colonel, —active duties,—and,—it will keep them both out of Russia,—for four years!

"I shall at once send to Kief the order relieving Colonel Radovich—and—you may say to him,—that the sooner he reports at Tomsk—the better,—for his future prospects! I shall give you the commission, instructions and all the papers—when we meet at dinner!

"You go to the Palace, I presume?" "At once,—Your Excellency," said Prince Youresief,—as he fled away from the presence of the lonely old man—now pitiable in his vain wrath,—as he sat there,—among the ruins of his Castle in Spain. For, even his gilded age had been vanquished by the young officer's rosy youth and Vera's keen duplicity!

Before the sun sank far out in the pale chilly Gulf of Finland,—Gregory Youresief held in his hand the Czar's permission for the marriage of Serge Dumont, the Manor Lord of Khaminavatka, with the Baroness Magda Radovich of Kherson.

The seal of the Emperor's Private Cabinet once upon the document,—the old Prince drove like a young wooer to the Minister of War's residence—where Father Adrian eagerly awaited him.

"You have telegraphed?" demanded the noble priest, his eyes lighting up with a strange emotion! "Yes! my friend! Both to Lemberg and to Kief! The warfare of three generations is over at last!"

"Then,"—cried Father Adrian, "I have found a way to atone for my breach of faith to my order. I will take a double speed post carriage, to-night! And—you can give me this document! For, I will meet our pilgrims of Love, at Lemberg!

"There,—in the Russian chapel,—I myself will openly marry them! These papers and certificates shall be filed by me at Kharkov—and—so,—the question of the first informal marriage can never be raised!"

"It is well," cried the Prince—"and I will hasten your departure! For an Imperial Podrovjna shall send you

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on as a courier of the Czar with lightning speed! Remain, and dine here!

"The horses shall come here for you,—and I will speed you, on your way!

It was under the northern starlight that the young priest began the journey which made the timid fugitive, —the Lady of Khaminavatka, before the whole world!

On his way, he often thought of Prince Youresief's last message, as he handed him a superb pearl necklace for the dove-eyed bride.

"They say pearls bring tears—my friend! These will not!"

Prince Youresief's four splendid horses chafed before the door of the Ministry of War—two days later, as, clad in his traveling garb,—he received the full papers demanded from the cringing brothers who trembled now at his slightest wish!

"I go back to the Kherson," he said. "Baron Alexandre,—the Minister of War knows that you leave here to-night for an indefinite stay!

"Do not disappoint him! It might work you harm! And—I exact, for Colonel Ivan's sake,—that you live peaceably with your wife and—thus spare him and his bride, Princess Vera Orbeleff—any future scandal!

"The Minister of War has just promoted Ivan to the rank of Colonel and Governor of Tomsk,—in Western Siberia!

"As I bear his orders—neither of you will see him,—for his post awaits him!

"He has orders for an instant departure! And so—General Andrè, you had better come back to Bratskoe and take charge of both estates!

"All you have to do is to remit to Ivan his money! The Minister is now waiting for you!"

As Youresief departed, he could see in General Andrè's trembling lip—that the bolt had struck home!

"The Princess Vera,—the head of the Radovich clan!" And so, the curtain of his little life drama was rung down at last, by his nephew's hand!

While Youresief drove away, facing his long ride to Bobrinetz, the two men who had been the dupes of the

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vivacious Princess Orbeleff gazed at each other in a gloomy silence,—until the Minister of War, in an icy tone, informed them of the change in the young Colonel's status.

"You will both execute your agreement with Prince Youresief,—in every way"—said the Minister, when he had concluded some pithy remarks! "I shall know of it! It is not necessary for you to return here to see me! If I need you,—I will find you!

"You—General Radovich, hasten down to Bratskoe—and see Colonel Ivan instantly dispatched for his new station! If he lingers—he will lose his rank—and,—you,—also!"

By a singular conceit, Prince Youresief determined to await the return of Father Adrian at Khaminavatka,—and so, he was both travel worn and weary—as he dashed into the courtyard of the deserted Palace on the Steppes!

Two weeks and a half had glided by on the road, and now, in the six weeks of his absence,—the witching summer was folding her golden tents over the steppe,—the murmuring stream sang through the leafy park, and the voice of the nightingale thrilled once more the trembling depths of the flower-scented forests, where Magda Dumont's light foot had sought the side of her lover!

The Prince's first duty was to send stout Boursakoff with the carriage on the full run to Bratskoe to bring Madame la Princesse Vera Radovich to receive an important secret communication!

Her piquant face lit up with a mocking curiosity as the dashing married beauty tore open the letter of her vengeful admirer who swayed the doors of the temple of Janus.

"A delightful surprise!" she bravely cried. "Ivan will be made a General, on our return! Thanks for this good news,—mon Prince,—for the Minister of War has kept his word—Ivan is a Colonel,—and—distance lends enchantment—when I see the epaulettes of a General gleaming out there waiting for my brave Ivan!"

Touched at the gallant woman's devotion to her young lover,—the Prince told her of Ivan's new station as head

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of the family,—the reversion of Bratskoe,—and—the income of the Dying Water domain!

"You are a good fairy in epaulettes! Mon Prince!" cried Vera,—as she impulsively kissed him. "And—when we—you and I—have had a last stolen dinner here,—I will send a courier for my Colonel!

"We will be half way to Nijni Novgovod on our road,—before General Andrè arrives!"

In her heart—the dauntless little woman feared that one face, alone, of all the world,—the man who had been her cruelest dupe.

"The first lady of the Kherson!"—she proudly cried, as she drove gaily home in the starlight! And—the towering little falcon saw many glittering honors awaiting her in the future.

But,—there was another who challenged that proud title. It was but a few days when Father Adrian brought to Prince Youresief the news of the completed happiness of the Lord and Lady of Khaminavatka!

"We go to Florence," wrote the happy Serge. "Already my dear Kherson nightingale has regained her voice,—and,—to you we owe what our whole lives can not repay—a debt of eternal gratitude!

"If there can be found a painter who can place a living happiness on canvas,—you shall have the face of the White Lady of Khaminavatka, to cheer your lonely hours.

"Send all letters to us, at the Russian Embassy, in Vienna,—where we will have our passports vised for the Italian tour! Do not look for our return until we have found that Italy has lost its charm,—and, that even by the throbbing Bay of Naples,—the heart can turn fondly back to the beloved steppe!

"And,—to you—Xenia now confides her eldest boy—a trust of her honest heart!

"She has been forced to become a fine lady—again—even against her iron will,—for the costume of the Ukraine is perforce laid aside, until we all gather again by the Dying Water! She is a Barina—in spite of herself!"

Prince Youresief learned of the success of Father

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Adrian's delicate embassy when he triumphantly dragged away his captive guest to the hospitable halls of Bobrinetz. "I must now learn from you—my dear Prince" —said the happy priest—"all the whole untold secrets of the unhappy past,—for to Excellence Barbe Federoff I must now go with Serge's letters and, as far as in me lies, show to her how Love, stronger than hate, led these ardent hearts from hostile ground, across the Dying Water to mingle in a union which has buried forever the ancient vendetta of the Kherson!

"Baron Serge has entrusted me with his full confidence, and Captain Wassili Federoff will find a golden future awaiting him!

"It is well!" cried the gallant old Marechale de Noblesse. "The spell is broken! The dark ban of the past is lifted!

"For,—a loving woman's tender eyes have brought a new light to that lonely palace of the steppes.

"Let me fill your glass, while we drink one toast! You were a soldier once—before you took up the cross of the church! The Lady of Khaminavatka,—gentle and true! God bless and keep her!" The eyes of both were moist with a sudden tenderness.

"Amen!" said Father Adrian,—as he thought,—with a faithful and loving memory of the one woman who had made his own life, once, a Heaven on earth,—the one beloved,—never absent,—the gentle guardian angel who even yet—across the darkened years, ruled the lonely altar of his loyal and unswerving heart.

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